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# A NEW WAY OF LIFE

*Books by Robert Hichens :*

A NEW WAY OF LIFE  
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MRS. MARDEN  
SNAKE-BITE  
BELLA DONNA  
THE GREEN CARNATION  
THE CALL OF THE BLOOD

# A NEW WAY OF LIFE

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*A Novel in Three Phases*

*By*  
ROBERT HICHENS

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# CONTENTS

## PHASE ONE

	PAGE
DÉBUT IN THE DESERT . . . . .	5

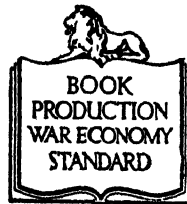
## PHASE TWO

ILLUSION . . . . .	93
--------------------	----

## PHASE THREE

DISILLUSION . . . . .	250
-----------------------	-----

*To my Friend*  
FRANCES KNITTEL



THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN COM-  
PLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE  
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

## PHASE ONE

### DÉBUT IN THE DESERT

AT the age of thirty Noel Herriot was the curate in charge of a church at Upper Green, which stood on a common near Tunbridge Wells. He was very good-looking but did not know it for he was by no means vain. Unfortunately, however, he was delicate. He flew two little red banners high up on his cheekbones. They afflicted him when he looked in the glass. And they had begun to cause anxiety among certain estimable ladies of his congregation.

"He looks," they said, "as if he were 'chesty,' and he's got a nasty cough. He ought to go to a good doctor."

Noel had also felt for some time that he should see a good doctor. He knew there was something wrong with him but dreaded a medical examination. He was afraid of what might be discovered. Perhaps he would be told that he ought to go to Davos. He was a sensitive fellow, an ardent student and bookworm, and he didn't want to give up his curacy in charge, which would no doubt in time lead to a country living in which he could settle down to a comfortable bookish life and find time to do some original writing on serious subjects.

That was really his only ambition, for he was not one of your greedily aspiring men. He was an orphan and happened to be well off. He had been at Oxford and had taken a first in honour moderations. While there he had read hard and had grossly neglected sports. In fact, he had been a regular 'swot' and had forgone the care of his body to satisfy the demands of his mind. Perhaps now he was going to pay for that. He wondered and was afraid.

But the summer began to fade. Presently the mists of autumn would appear, and then later winter winds would blow over the common. And the red in his cheeks and the tiresome cough persisted. He realized that, unwilling or not, he must seek medical advice, and one day he went up to London and drove to the house of a doctor in Wimpole Street, whom he had heard of as very unorthodox and plain-spoken, but as a man who brought about some wonderful cures. His name was Rutherford Craven. After waiting for nearly an hour in a big room strewn with copies of *Punch*, *The Illustrated London News*, and other delights, Noel was shown in to the celebrated doctor, a broad, solid fair man, with muscular shoulders, a powerful neck, and the steady alert eyes of one who had boxed well in his time; a man, in fact, the antithesis of Noel.

He was received with a bluntness that struck him as formidable, and after the preliminary conversation, during which an experienced doctor sums up, his patient was invited to strip for a thorough examination.

When this was over and he had nervously adjusted his garments and buttoned himself up he awaited the verdict. This was not encouraging.

The doctor enquired first whether there had been any lung trouble in the Herriot family. There had and Noel confessed it. Both his parents had died young; his father of lung trouble, his mother of influenza. The next question was:

"Any brothers and sisters?"

"No, none."

"Have you been to a public school?"

"Yes, Charterhouse."

"Any university?"

"Yes, I was at St. John's College, Oxford."

"Any distinctions?"

"I took a first in honour moderations."

"Any distinctions in sports?"

"No. I read hard and had no time for sports."

"What I expected. The state of your body shows that. You've neglected the body for the brain."

"Am I really ill?" asked Noel with an anxiety he couldn't conceal.

"Indeed you are. Didn't you know it?"

"I had begun to suspect it."

"My good fellow, you are on the way—only as yet *on the way*, mind you—to consumption."

Noel looked at the carpet and said nothing. He didn't want to show emotion.

"Have you ever travelled?"

"Very little. I've made two excursions in France. I've visited Switzerland. But only for short periods."

'Now,' he thought, 'Davos is coming.'

And his heart sank. But Davos was not coming. Doctor Craven leaned over the big table at which he was sitting and said:

"I'm going to advise a horse cure for your condition."

"A horse cure! What's that?"

"You're a sick slave of the mind, that's what you are. Delicacy is in your family and you've been encouraging it, giving it its head. One of your lungs is affected. You're a curate, you told me."

"Yes, curate in charge of a church at Upper Green near Tunbridge Wells."

"You may be a whole curate, but you're only half a man."

"Really, Doctor!"

"Yes, really. Now I'll tell you what you should do. I would say *must* do, but I can't force you to anything, so—*should* do if you want to get well."

"You think, then, I could get quite well?"

"Yes, if you take a horse cure."

"Then I will; I will."

"Got any money?"

"Yes, my mother left me well off. But what is a horse cure? Do you mean riding? If so I could learn and ride in Broadwater Forest."

Doctor Craven's large lips stretched in a smile that made him look suddenly less formidable.

"A horse cure isn't only riding," he said.

"Then what is it?"

"You must give up your curacy; you must give up England; you must entirely change your whole way of life."

"How?"

"You must live a man's life, not a curate's life."

"Can't a curate live a man's life?" exclaimed Noel, suddenly firing up.

"Possibly. I've had little experience in the clerical line. But there's many a man couldn't live a curate's life."

"It's all a matter of taste," said Noel with a touch of defiance.

"No doubt. But if you want to get perfectly well, strong even——"

"I do, I do."

"Then you must cease living like a studious curate—you are studious, aren't you?"

"Yes. Books and study are my greatest pleasure."

"Exactly! And live like a roughish outdoor man."

"Rough! Outdoor! Where?"

"That's what I'm going to tell you—are you listening?"

"Of course I'm listening."

"I advise—this is only advice; you needn't take it!—I advise you to get out of England as soon as possible and to make a beeline for the Sahara Desert."

"A beeline—for the Sahara Desert!" said Noel, thinking the doctor was mad.

"Yes—go to Marseilles. Get a steamer there for Algiers, and when you get to Algiers travel dead south."

"Dead south! But where to?"

"Dead south to Biskra, and on."

"On *where*?"

"On south through the desert. To Touggourt, or anywhere, where there's sun, and the desert air, and the sands, and the great spaces."

"But I never heard of Too—what is it?"

"Touggourt. But they'll tell you in Biskra."

"But where shall I live?"

"I should advise living in camp. No smart hotels, if there are any—but there aren't! A tent. That sort of thing. Near a village or desert town, where you can get something to eat; couscous, a bird or two, gazelle flesh, oranges, dates, sour milk, Arab bread."

"But how long do you want me to live like that?"

"Indefinitely."

"I thought that perhaps for a few weeks——"

"A few weeks, man!" said the doctor with infinite scorn. "*That* wouldn't cure you! You need months of the open-air life. Get a horse. Ride every day. Harden yourself. Don't shun fatigue. Live as far as you can like a desert Arab."

"But I've never even seen one, except at Earl's Court."

"You'll see plenty when you get to the Sahara. Come home, if you like, to be vetted when the great heats begin, and then back you go again. I'll tell you when the cure's worked sufficiently. And when it has, *if you still wish to*, you can return to the curate's life in—where did you say it was?"

"Upper Green, on a common near Tunbridge Wells. Of course I shall wish to go back."

The doctor's lips stretched again, this time in a wide smile which revealed a set of magnificent, not small, teeth.

"Then I'll tell you when you can go back."

"But how long do you think——?"

"I can't say yet. No one can say."

"But could such a life really do any good? Mightn't it kill me?"

"Kill or cure, eh?"

"Exactly! Exactly!"

"I don't think it will. I can see you in, say, a year and a half from now,



or a bit more." He half shut his eyes. "I can see you as a fine upstanding young fellow, the evil roses gone from your cheeks, your body braced up, your muscles taut and firm, your eyes bright and clear, your step light, your heart light, a real devil of a fellow and as brown as a berry!"

"You mean that!" said Noel with more vitality. "You really mean it?"

"Yes, really! But you must live a real desert life and no hotel nonsense. No luxury. No silly softness. Give me your address. I'll write it all down and send it to you by to-morrow night's post. And now off with you, and give in your resignation or whatever you call it. I'll only charge you a guinea—out of respect for the cloth."

He got up, looking amazingly tall and strong and healthy.

"Good-bye. When you come back, my God, how different you'll look!"

Noel gave his address, paid his guinea, and went out, feeling almost prostrate and yet, at the same time, wildly excited.

On the way to consumption! Yet could be saved; but only by going to the Sahara Desert and living there like an Arab! The doctor must surely be mad. Yet he didn't look mad.

'What a pity he takes the name of the Deity on his lips like that,' Noel said to himself.

In the street he lifted a thin hand and was soon in a hansom cab on the way to Charing Cross Station.

During the short journey from London to Tunbridge Wells, Noel continued to feel violently excited. He had bought an afternoon paper, but he didn't, he couldn't, read it. Instead he looked out of the window at the placid Kentish landscape, with its small hedged-in fields, its gentle hills, its not wild woods. How familiar to him it all was, to him who had so seldom been out of England. Could he go out of England? Could he resign his curacy, entirely change his life, make a beeline for the Sahara Desert? The Sahara Desert! What on earth would he do there? He thought of his choice little library. He couldn't take the whole of that with him into the far-off sands. He thought of the pulpit in which he had preached so many persuasive sermons. He thought of his congregation, of the many dear people who were so solicitous about his health and who so often asked him to tea. He thought of the common upon which the windows of his comfortable, though not ostentatious, lodgings looked out. He thought of the Toad Rock, of the Broadwater Forest, of the Pantiles, and then again of the Sahara Desert. The word 'Sahara' suggested to his mind a vast and arid wilderness scorched by the tropical sun. How could he change his cosy and sheltered life, his pleasant, bookish, and accustomed existence for a tent in the Sahara? The idea was grotesque. Doctor Craven must have been mad to suggest such a thing. A sudden cough shook his thin body. The railway carriage felt cold. He drew his long black overcoat more closely round him and glanced up to see if the ventilator was shut.

Consumption! He shivered. Why had he been singled out for this fate, to hear this mad doctor's decision? But if the doctor was mad, then he, Noel Herriot, would be mad to accept it and act upon it. And he wasn't mad and wouldn't do a mad thing. No! Certainly not! Instead he would go to another doctor, an orthodox man, not a crazy original! Because

he consulted a doctor he was not obliged to do what that doctor told him to do.

He would consult someone else as soon as possible.

He acted on this resolve and went again to London and saw a bland old man with a pronounced bedside manner, who examined him, said the fee was three guineas, please, and told him to go to Davos as soon as possible and to stay there as long as was necessary. How long would that be? The doctor had no idea. But Davos was the best place to go to. He had sent many patients there. And were they cured? Well, as to that, the doctor couldn't be sure. But their condition was ameliorated in many cases. And that was something. And the fee was three guineas, please.

Noel came away very downhearted. The bland doctor hadn't convinced him. But somehow the doctor he was trying to defy, Doctor Craven of Wimpole Street, had. And after much mental wrestling he decided to do the mad thing, the first mad thing he had ever done in his life. He decided to resign his curacy and to try the horse cure.

Having decided, he no longer wobbled. His cough was getting worse. Now and then he had temperature. A conviction, a dreadful conviction, came to him that there was no time to be lost. He sent in his resignation from his curacy; he gave warning to his landlady; he preached a farewell sermon which moved several old ladies to tears, and he set about packing up his 'effects.' They consisted chiefly of his precious collection of books. What to do about them? Most of them he must leave in storage. Some he surely must take, even into the Sahara Desert. He could not be totally bereft of literature, he who was such a definitely 'bookish' young man. There would, there must, be many hours when he would not be galloping about on an Arab horse to the farthest verges of the desert. At night, when the sun was down, and the hyenas were laughing in the sands, and the jackals were going their rounds, he would have to do something in his tent till the hour for retirement to his camp bed arrived. Books! He must take a few books with him! And he set aside a few, a very few: a Horace, a Shakespeare, a Wordsworth, a Macaulay, a Charles Lamb, a Goldsmith, a Plato. These he would take with him, and two or three more. But he must have some wilder works, more suitable to the existence of one undergoing a horse cure. And he consulted a young man at Hatchard's in Piccadilly and came away with *Eothen, A Summer in the Sahara*, a volume of Maupassant containing North African descriptions, and two works of Pierre Loti dealing with African life. He bought also a guidebook to Tunisia and Algeria. Thus fortified, he took the train back to Tunbridge Wells.

When he arrived at his lodgings on the common he found waiting for him the following note and a parcel neatly tied up with ribbon. He opened the note first.

*The Myrtles, Fern Road,  
Upper Green,  
Tunbridge Wells,  
[and the date]*

MY DEAR MR. HERRIOT,

*All here, including even my servant Henrietta, are deeply grieved at the prospect of losing you. Knowing you are going into the wilds of Africa, and searching about in my mind for a suitable memento to accompany you there, I have, I hope and think, hit upon something that may be of use to you and prepare you for what probably lies before you. It is a book, and though I have not had*

*time to read it myself, my great friend, Miss Flossie Burnford, who has, tells me it is a mine of information and interest about the region for which you are bound. Hoping it may prove to be a comfort and solace to you on your journey and may give you an insight into the sort of life you will henceforth be leading. So different from our beloved Upper Green!*

*I remain,  
With best wishes for your welfare,  
And my deepest regrets at your departure,  
Your sincere friend,*

PRISCILLA CRANK.

Greatly touched by this tribute, and eager for accurate information about the strange existence that lay before him, Noel hastily untied the parcel that had come with the note and drew out a book with a light red cover. On it in gold lettering was the following :

*The Sheikh's Revenge  
A Romance, by  
Daphne del Mondo*

He read it over his supper and till far into the night. And as he read it seemed to him that his brain escaped from his control and went at a gallop into fantastic regions of romance. But was it merely romance? Miss Flossie Burnford had evidently taken it seriously, and she was intelligent though not exactly 'travelled.' Being a purist by temperament, Noel could not disguise from himself that the book was very far from being a classic. Plato would surely not have approved of it. Nevertheless, it gave him a thrill, even a succession of thrills.

'Is this the sort of thing then,' he said to himself, his eyes almost starting from their sockets, 'the sort of thing that lies before me? What would my bishop say to it?'

A horse cure indeed!

Although Noel Herriot, before leaving England, laid in a stock of clothes, underwear, etc., such as he was informed would be suitable to the North African climate, he could not bring himself to abandon his clerical attire till he was on the other side of the Mediterranean. He therefore went on board ship at Marseilles clad in black, a jam-pot collar round his rather frail neck, a hat of the black-pudding persuasion on his head. He looked anything rather than African and he still felt intensely Upper Green. As the ship ploughed her way out of the harbour past the Isle of the Château d'If he leaned pensively on the rail, gazing upward at Notre-Dame de la Garde, and wondering what was in store for him, now that he was absolutely *en route*, his world left behind with all his acquaintances and friends, and his books—except the very few stowed away in his luggage—he said to himself :

'I am crazy to be doing this! That doctor was crazy to advise it, and I am crazy to be taking his advice.'

But then a fit of coughing seized him and he thought :

'But perhaps he was right. Perhaps it was the only thing to do if I'm to get well. A few months of it, and perhaps I shall be a new man. I *will* be a new man. I'll go back to Upper Green as strong as a horse, so that they won't know me.'

The comparison of himself to a horse often recurred to his mind at this time because the doctor had spoken of a horse cure. He resolved that since he had started he would go through with it, not so much like a curate as like a man, the sort of man Doctor Craven had so brutally spoken of. He couldn't go back now, so he must go forward with resolution. He must do the best with it. He must, he would, turn himself somehow into a new man.

But it would surely be very difficult.

One thing helped him to think it was possible during the voyage to Algiers. It was this. Although the sea was decidedly rough, and he had never before made a voyage, except across the Channel, he wasn't seasick. He didn't even feel seasick, though many of the passengers were horribly ill. This fact gave him courage, even roused in his bosom a slight, but definite feeling of conceit.

"I'm a good sailor!"

He said this to himself in the midst of the elements and stuck, or tried to stick, out his rather narrow chest.

On the second day out when, on a still-rough sea, they were not very far from the Algerian coast, and he was looking over the rail into the bows of the ship upon a crowd of steerage passengers, among whom there were a good many Arabs, he was secretly gratified by perceiving that several of these were exceedingly upset.

"I'm a good sailor. The Arabs are not good sailors."

The knowledge was satisfactory. It would surely help him, buoy him up, after he had made the beeline to the Sahara on which, of course, he was resolved. Doctor Craven had been so insistent on his making this beeline at once that he was determined not to linger even for one night in Algiers if it was possible to catch a train to Biskra. He was very anxious about his health. He had a constant feeling that what he was about, perhaps crazily, it often seemed so to him, to undertake would prove to be kill or cure. But now he was in for it and must 'go through with it.'

When at about half-past four on his second day out he saw the white town of Algiers mounting up to the Kasbah and, on the left, to the height of Mustapha Supérieur with its luxurious gardens and its masses of trees, he felt very small, in spite of immunity from seasickness, very anxious and also exceptionally clerical. Here spread out before him was the fringe of this vast unknown world of Africa. How would it receive him? What would his life be like in it? This landscape was totally unlike Upper Green. He saw that at a glance. Instead of a comforting and familiar church tower he perceived the snowy dome of a mosque, the narrow shape of a minaret. Here Allah ruled. He twisted his thin neck in the jam-pot collar and looked at his black trousers. Better perhaps to change into the mufti he had brought with him before landing; into a light flannel shirt and an open collar, a Norfolk jacket, a pair of flannel trousers, and not to arrive in the Sahara dressed like a blackbird about to perch in the sands. And he hurried down to his cabin. But he did not stay there. It was hot. His luggage was all packed and locked. And Africa drew him, the enlarging and more detailed vision of Africa. And he hastened back to the deck. He was a clergyman and would arrive as a clergyman. He must not be ashamed of his calling. Indeed, he was not ashamed. But as he looked down on the wharf, with its shouting and perspiring crowd of natives yelling for clients, he felt that his attire was strangely unsuitable to Africa.

Africa ! And he knew no one, not a single soul, in all Africa ! He felt very black, very lonely, very desolate even. Would he be able to 'stick it' ? It was all very well for a large man in Wimpole Street to order a poor fellow-being to 'make a beeline for the Sahara Desert.' It was a very different matter for the fellow who had to carry out the instruction. But Noel felt now frankly afraid of Algiers. He must leave it and go on at once 'dead south.' If there were a night train to Biskra he would have time to catch it.

After arranging at the post office in Algiers that any letters addressed to him at the Poste Restante there were to be forwarded on to the Poste Restante Biskra once a week, under cover to 'Monsieur Noel Herriot'—he thought that the right thing to do as he was in a French colony—he did catch the night train and travelled on through the sultry African night, often coughing and gasping for breath. He did not lie down, though he was alone in his first class carriage. All night he sat up unable to sleep, partly because of the coughing, partly because of perturbation of mind. Kill or cure ! Suppose it proved to be kill ? It would be tragic to die alone in the desert, with no familiar face looking down on you sympathetically, no kindly hand to perform the friendly offices that mean so much to the helpless. A wild thought broke into his mind.

'What if I buy at once a return ticket at Biskra ? What if I defy Doctor Craven and go back to die in Upper Green ? There, at any rate, there will be some dear people to mourn for me and regret my passing. Out here no one will bother about me.'

An absurd and familiar comparison entered the field of his mind and he added to himself :

'Out here I shall die like a fly and no one will care.'

He very nearly concluded with 'a damn' ! But just remembered in time who and what he was and broke off.

When at last the dawn came he peered out of the carriage window with weary eyes and saw a landscape that seemed to him vast. There were hills in the distance, but they were remote, separated from him by flat land, without any hedges such as one sees all over Kent. The train jangled slowly along over this flat land, on which here and there he saw the wigwams of native encampments. In the distance a solitary horseman moved mysteriously towards the horizon. Why ? Where could he be going ? What could be his purpose, his errand ? A horseman ! A horse cure ! And he, Noel Herriot, had never been on a horse.

It was crazy to have travelled out here. Doctor Rutherford Craven was crazy to have prescribed such a cure for the threat of consumption.

'I shall have to go back by the first train. And all this money will be wasted.'

Another ugly thought came into his mind.

'And my place in Upper Green will be filled !'

And he thought of a London nursing home, or a London hospital. It seemed crazy to go on. Would it, perhaps, be more crazy still to go back ?

Just then the sun rose above the edge of the distant hills, and instantly the landscape looked rather less desolate : the sadness of grey was tinged with the radiance of gold. And :

'Perhaps I had better give it a trial !' Noel said to himself. 'It would be more manly. And perhaps it will work.'

He had not really very much hope of that. There was something so

drastic about the treatment prescribed to him that he could scarcely believe that his poor body would be able to respond to it. Still there was the possibility. Doctor Craven had seemed almost sure. About his personality there was something convincing. It would be stupid to throw away the chance now that one was actually in Africa.

As the morning wore on, although the sun began to blaze, this strange world, Noel thought, looked increasingly sinister. Green crops died away from it. The bare brown earth was obviously parched. A tragic dryness showed everywhere. And mountains appeared which looked as if they were made of iron. Our traveller's cough increased. The dryness seemed to irritate his throat. He began to feel terribly tired, almost exhausted, and as if he could not endure another minute of the journey. He had a great longing for water, to see water, hear water, moisten his parched lips in water. And how he wanted to rest his now weary limbs, to sit in shadow or to lie down in a shadowy room !

A horrid sensation as of claustrophobia came to him, a longing to break out of the train, out of this narrow carriage in which he had been confined for so many hours. He felt as if his breath were impeded. He couldn't draw a deep breath. Fear came upon him, and sweat broke out on his forehead.

'I must have more air ! I must get out of here !'

He got up—he was alone in the carriage—and actually laid a hand on the carriage door. He might possibly have opened it and jumped out on to the line had he not been stopped by a blessed sight. Suddenly he saw water, actually water flowing, and a vision of fruit trees growing along the edge of it. He saw, too, as he thrust his head out of the window, a white road leading towards a red mountain range. And as he gazed the jangling train began to slow up and stopped. And before him, on an open space, he saw a group of staring Arabs and a Frenchman in a sort of official uniform, who was evidently a stationmaster.

'I'll get out here !' he said to himself. 'I can't go on. I'll get out here and have a rest. There's water here.'

But was there an inn ?

An Arab youth, with larky eyes, wrenched open the door. Noel said in French :

"Is there an inn here ?"

The youth answered in faulty, but fairly fluent French that there was a very fine hotel, better than Biskra. Then making a long leg, he sprang into the carriage and lifted Noel's hand luggage from the rack. Noel would pick up his books and his heavy luggage at Biskra to-morrow or after to-morrow. But now he must have a drink of cool water and lie down to rest.

So it was that he came to the inn in the Gorge of El Kantara.

Noel was never to forget that pause in his beeline to the Sahara. Often later on, when his life and, as it often seemed to him, he himself were transformed, in imagination he saw himself in his dusty black clothes, a dusty and limp black hat set awry on his thick tousled hair, walking along the white road to the inn with the young guide beside him, nonchalantly bearing his hand luggage and chattering to him in almost incomprehensible French. He felt dazed, very tired, very weak even, but not unhappy. He was entering into what, to him, was a wonderland. Some pride of the traveller came to him.

"Not many English clergymen have done what I am doing now. This is an almost unique experience, something I shall never forget, something I shall be proud of later on. If Upper Green could see me now! If the people of Lower Green knew what was happening to me!"

"What is your name?" he asked his guide, and received the answer:

"Mohammed."

"Mohammed!" he repeated, gazing at the thin skittish youth, with the turban set on his fuzzy black hair.

And what he had read about the Prophet and his teaching rose up in his memory.

"Mohammed very good name!" said Mohammed with pride.

"Yes, yes, of course it is!" Noel agreed with anxious haste.

"What *your* name?"

Noel gave it.

"That not like Mohammed!"

"No; not at all!"

They spoke, of course, always in French. At that time, many years ago, the Algerian natives seldom knew even a word of English. Noel's French wasn't bad; Mohammed's was often preposterous. Still they got along somehow and began to feel that they knew each other as they came to the inn which stood in the gorge at the edge of the caravan road from the Tell, with Judas trees growing in front of it and the river running on into the Sahara behind it.

How enchanting was the sound of its water in Noel's ears as he turned into the railed courtyard before the inn door!

Half an hour later, after a cold bath, primitive but marvellously refreshing, clad in light clothes, luckily bestowed in his hand luggage, his neck feeling pleasantly free encircled by a soft collar with turned-down points, he was seated alone on an upstairs terrace on to which his bedroom opened, some bread and butter and strong coffee on a little table beside him, in a condition of semi-stupefied and almost trancelike calm.

Mohammed was waiting below having already annexed him as his master and money provider in true Arab fashion.

Hot and perfectly still was this world, closed in by the rocky precipices. Apparently no other traveller was staying in the inn. Noel was glad of that, if it was so. The famille Bertrand, who owned the inn, lived in a part of the house separated from the travellers' part by the *salle à manger*. It was a homely little place, rather bare but spotlessly clean. Already Noel was beginning to feel oddly at home in it. Instead of going on into the desert he wished he might linger here for a while, dreaming on this brick-paved terrace of the upper storey with his eyes on the white caravan road behind the line of the pollarded Judas trees. What peace here, what sun-kissed remoteness! And close by, beyond the bridge over the river, the vast mystery of the Great Desert. Already, though as yet he was not definitely conscious of it, Africa had laid a hand on him such as England, his country, had never laid, and his provincial and clerical heart was beginning to respond to the touch instead of feeling it as repellent.

He sipped his coffee, nibbled his bread and butter, and actually felt happy in his strange inertia. Vague thoughts of Upper Green and his life there floated in his mind like scarcely defined plants in water. He remembered the smile that had come on the lips of the doctor when he, Noel, had said, "Of course I shall wish to go back," meaning to the clerical life in

England. It had looked like the smile of a sceptic. The doctor hadn't believed him.

"But when I get well——"

At that moment he was racked again by his cough. The whole of his thin, almost emaciated body was shaken by it. When the paroxysm died away he remembered the doctor's insistence that he should harden himself, avoid all softness of life, have done with everything that even hinted at the luxurious, live—hadn't he said?—more or less like a desert Arab. He had never been specially luxurious, but he had liked to be thoroughly comfortable in a reasonable way. Was it 'soft' to be sitting now on a basket chair with a rather hard red cushion on it and sipping the Arab coffee? No. All Arabs, even the poorest, drank coffee. He had brought *The Sheikh's Revenge* with him. It was evident that a sheikh's life was far less simple and far more luxurious than a curate's life at Upper Green. And in any case it seemed to Noel that in his condition of health a really hard life must inevitably make an end of him. Yet when he looked into the letter which, according to his promise, Doctor Craven had sent to him after their meeting, he read the prescription for a way of life that must surely finish him off. It had seemed almost like an order to go off to Africa and commit suicide there. And now . . .

A loud coughing rose up to him from below. It was followed by a clearing of the throat that resembled an excavation, and then by a paroxysm of spitting. Horrified, Noel got up from his chair and peeped over the rail of the terrace. Who was the sufferer? Was there another invalid like himself here, perhaps come from Europe by doctor's orders? No! The cougher was an Arab, and not an old one. Evidently he had been sitting on a bench by the inn door with Mohammed and had got up to cough. For Noel, leaning over, now saw Mohammed on the bench nonchalantly smoking a cigarette and calmly watching the performance. And when at last the paroxysm was over the victim of it went to the bench and sat down, felt in his djelabiah, fished out a cigarette, and lighted it at Mohammed's.

So they coughed terribly out here—the Arabs! But this was not the desert. Noel felt that he had better get on as soon as possible, go much farther south. He was confirmed in this feeling when night fell over the gorge and the river. For the air became suddenly so cold that an Arab boy came to his bedroom, in which there was a fireplace, and lit a roaring fire of brushwood and palm logs. And after his dinner Noel went to bed under a quilt packed with feathers. As he lay there, before he fell into a sleep of exhaustion, and looked at the flames casting light on the bare wooden floor, he said to himself:

'I must get on! I must get on into the desert!'

And the sound of the terrible coughing seemed sounding still in his ears.

On the following day, the tenth of October, influenced by the Arab's paroxysm of coughing on the previous afternoon, Noel left El Kantara reluctantly and took the train to Biskra, accompanied by Mohammed who, evidently an altruist, felt that he could not permit his master to brave the dangers of Biskra without a devoted servant to take care of him.

"Biskra not like El Kantara. Here all people good. In Biskra many bad peoples."

Noel attempted a feeble protest which was at once overruled by Mohammed, who exclaimed, almost with passion, that he wanted no money except



enough for a third class ticket and was coming simply because he had taken such a liking to Noel and wanted to put him wise to the Sahara.

Although they travelled in different classes Mohammed appeared at the door of Noel's compartment whenever the train stopped to point out the charms and attractions of the countryside. The longest stop they made was at a station called El Outaya, or the great plain. Here it seemed that something had gone wrong with the engine, and there was a pause of at least half an hour while much that seemed mysterious was done to it. Mohammed opened the carriage door and invited Noel to get out to look at the Djebel-el-Malah, or mountain of salt, which he announced as one of the marvels of the world.

Noel stepped down obediently, and it was here that he had his first definite vision, his first real taste, of the spacious freedom of Africa.

Directly he set his feet on the sun-dried earth of the tiny station he drank in a breath of the intoxicating air which gives to the great plains neighbouring the true desert, and to the desert itself, the wonderful attraction, the almost irresistible lure, which some travellers can never rid themselves of once they have felt it. He stood still by Mohammed, who was busy pointing out the Salt Mountain, which glistened in the sun at the edge of the plain, and, heedless of his chattering voice and his pointing finger, drew breath after breath of the air into his semi-exhausted lungs.

"What air!" he murmured. "What marvellous air!"

And then he added:

"What spaces! What a glory of emptiness!"

He even stretched out his thin arms in an eloquent gesture, like one longing to embrace a world. And in that moment, for the first time in his life, he knew the meaning of ecstasy. Yes, he had an ecstatic moment.

"Wonderful! Wonderful! It's wonderful here!"

And Upper Green, with its common and its gorse bushes, sank away from his memory and his longing, and he was glad to be far from it and from his life at the edge of it, and a strange confidence in Doctor Rutherford Craven flowed through him for the first time. That big man perhaps knew. That big man was perhaps not crazy.

'I might become a new man out here!' Noel said to himself with astonishment, almost with awe.

And he let his arms fall.

'Shall I become a new man?'

It was a tremendous question, and as he asked it of himself his pale face, with the patches of red on the cheekbones, became so changed that Mohammed was quite startled and said in his pidgin-French:

"My gentleman not liking El Outaya?"

"Yes. I like it."

Noel stared out over the plain, which showed cultivation. Men were at work here, watched over by the glittering Salt Mountain. Far away he saw a dark patch of trees standing out from the rest of the landscape.

"What's that, over there?"

"That belonging to a Frenchman, a colon. He there long time but making bad business. Not like Ferme Dufourg."

"Where's that?"

"Ten kilometres nearer Biskra. That very fine farm. Moosoo Dufourg very rich man. Why not you taking a farm and living here? I helping you with everything."

Noel smiled faintly at the fantastic suggestion and turned away from Mohammed, who followed him and was about to begin his chatter again when Noel summoned up courage to check him.

"Leave me now. Call me when the train's going on. Go, I tell you!"

Mohammed stared, and his bluish lips stuck out in a kind of pout that made him look sulkily childish. But he obeyed and sauntered reluctantly towards the recalcitrant engine, while Noel walked a little way from the station, then stood still and gazed at the landscape.

Many times later on in his life Noel's memory recalled the moments when, for the first time, he stood in the sunshine beyond the tiny station, alone, gazing over the fertile plain. Here, though bounded by desert and watched over by the Aurés Mountains, there was even then cultivation. Man had been busily at work and the blue-white glitter of the Salt Mountain contrasted with the green of the spreading crops in the plain. In the distance was a camp of Spahis, and Noel saw one of them, wrapped in his cloak, galloping towards a bordj surrounded by pale brown walls that rose out of the green. He followed the soldier with his eyes until the forms of rider and horse diminished and were absorbed in the glare of the sunshine. His life and that galloping soldier's—his life at Upper Green! The dear, kind ladies, the pleasant company at little tea parties, the walks across the common to the church with its chiming bells! What would that galloping horseman think of such a life as that? Barracks and pulpit, red cloak and spurs, black garments and jam-pot collar. Which was the better life? And a sharp curiosity was born in Noel for knowledge; not the knowledge he had sought for so long in what he called 'the best books'—he had never read rubbish till he studied *The Sheikh's Revenge*—but for knowledge away from books, knowledge of life that the typical student usually knows little of, knowledge of men, not merely of the men who 'suited' him, but of all kinds of men; of men like that Spahi who now was lost in the blaze of the African sun. And instead of feeling exiled and desolate and abandoned in the African landscape, far from his friends and from all whom he knew, he felt keen and expectant and suddenly much happier. This was going to be a great experience. He must welcome instead of shrinking from it. He must not feel small and foolishly humble because he was an English clergyman in the midst of the children of Allah, ignorant of all that they knew, though full of knowledge they lacked. He must bear himself in such a way as to win their respect.

Could such a man as that galloping Spahi respect him?

Somewhere in the distance he heard the faint sound of a shot.

He had never had a gun in his hand. He had never yet mounted a horse. It struck him, painfully almost, that there was a lot he must learn out here, if he were to live successfully the life laid down for him by that large doctor in Wimpole Street. When he had been in the pulpit and had looked at the congregation in Upper Green Church, he had sometimes felt that he had authority, that those beneath him in the church looked up to him, not only physically but spiritually, that they even hung on his words.

He felt very small now, but full of anticipation. There was magic in the glittering white Salt Mountain, with its mysterious tinges of blue. There was something subtly miraculous in this air from the desert which travelled over the plain and stirred the green crops and seemed to bring a message to him. He could not interpret that message yet. Some day, perhaps, he would be able to interpret it. He must learn out here, learn new lessons

of life which he could never have mastered in Upper Green. Would he, could he, prove to be an apt pupil?

He gazed at the far-away ridge of hills which divided him from the vision of the Great Sahara which lay beyond.

A shrill whistle cut through the silence. The engine was ready at last. He turned and with a quick step went back to the train.

Biskra, as it was then, unspoiled by fame and fashion, at first astonished and then enchanted Noel. A noisy throng of natives had gathered in the station to await the arrival of the train, and he, the only European to get out as it happened that day, was immediately surrounded by brown and black strangers who seemed exuberantly anxious for immediate and close intimacy with him. This, however, was fiercely discouraged by Mohammed, who even showed an intention of using physical violence in defence of what he now evidently regarded as his personal property. The struggle, which caused beads of moisture to bedew Noel's pale forehead, was stern and brief, and before he fully understood what was happening he found himself shoved upward into a shaky carriage with a stretch of dirty canvas for roof and being driven away across a sunlit space of parched earth towards an avenue lined with pepper trees and mimosas. Mohammed sat opposite to him, smiling triumphantly.

"Biskris very bad people. If I not living with you always you having much trouble here!"

In spite of a curious dreamy vagueness that was beginning to take possession of Noel in this Saharan village, a sudden resentment was born in him at this remark, a sudden resolve to be his own master in this new and peculiar life.

"You are not going to live with me always, Mohammed," he said. "I let you come for the journey. To-morrow I shall pay your fare back to El Kantara."

Mohammed suddenly looked evil. His eyes narrowed. His big lips tightened. And it seemed to Noel that his narrow nostrils were enlarged.

"I doing everything for you and you wanting to throw me away," he snarled.

"What you have done and do I shall pay for. To-morrow you can go home. I have no need of a servant here."

"You not knowing the Biskris! You being robbed and perhaps murdered here."

Feeling a strange and dreamy indifference in face of this threat, Noel waved a thin hand.

"I can take care of myself," he asserted in English.

"I not know what you saying."

At this moment the carriage drew up before the Hôtel du Sahara.

That night Noel slept as he had never slept before, though his bed was hard and his little room almost monastic in its bareness. Sleep took him like a seizure. He was suppressed—so he thought of it afterwards—for ten hours. The desert air had made him like a man almost drunk. After his evening meal of thin vegetable soup, mutton and cheese, with a couple of enormous and juicy oranges, he went out alone for a stroll in the village. Mohammed, waiting sulkily before the door under the arcade, tried to go with him. But Noel firmly refused his company.

'I must fight for myself in this new life,' he thought, 'or I shall get nowhere.'

And he actually brought out the word "Imshi !" which he had learned from a guidebook as a necessary word for travellers in desert places, and added, "Roh !"

The words went home to Mohammed like a bullet. He fell back indignantly with a doglike lifting of lips which showed a sharp side tooth, and Noel walked on alone into an African fairyland. (So it seemed to his unaccustomed eyes, with its hooded figures in moonlight, its Ouled Naïl girls bedizened with coins of gold, with masses of false hair, painted faces, and henna-dyed hands, with its storytellers, its wailing singers, its flute and pipe players and beaters of the tom-tom.)

Strolling strangers accosted him in a language he didn't understand. He made no reply but walked on in his dream. Small boys in tattered raiment ran at his heels. He heeded them not. He was drowned in his dream. He had never imagined anything quite like this. It seemed to be furtively feeling, as with delicately intrusive hands, about his identity and trying to steal him, the Upper Green curate, away from himself. Leaving what ? An unknown residue, something he knew nothing about, something he must presently investigate, try to come to terms with. He walked on, a stranger in Biskra, and one who was also a stranger to himself, walked and paused and gazed and listened, seeing the motionless odalisques, the wild gestures of the storyteller, hearing the wavering voices of the singers, the scream of the pipes, the dull thud of the tom-toms, till he became the victim of this strange influential air. Then he made his way back to the arcade, with its gleams of white through the archways and its shadows against the walls, and he reached his room, dragged off his clothes, and was suppressed for ten hours.

On the morrow, summoning up all his determination, he paid and firmly dismissed Mohammed, who abandoned him, muttering dark threats of horrible disasters to come. When the lad had slunk off to the railway station Noel felt a great sensation of release, mingled, however, with a creeping of something like shame. Had he been unkind, even almost brutal ? Or had he been merely masculine, forthright, an approximation to the sort of man described to him by the doctor in Wimpole Street ? After all, why should he allow himself to be saddled with a servant he did not need and had not even engaged ? Yet now, though released, he began to feel lonely. Liberty was his. But what was he going to do with it ?

Directly he set his foot out of doors a tall, well-dressed Arab in snowy garments, with a hint of orange-coloured gilet peeping out on his chest, addressed him, to his great surprise, in pidgin-English and offered his services. He looked about thirty, but on enquiry being made as to his age, confessed to sixteen. This was obviously absurd, but Noel did not dispute it, more especially as the man said with a smile :

"You sixteen too. We like brothers."

Having ascertained that this apparently amiable adolescent's name was Mohammed ben Taha, and that he had learned his English while in service with an English sportsman, with whom he had made several African journeys and from whom he had obtained a splendid testimonial which he immediately produced for Noel's inspection, Noel consented to take him on while he made a thorough inspection of Biskra in daylight. This inspection, which was carried beyond the French village into the amazingly Biblical surroundings of the oasis, took Noel a week.

His guide, Taha—Noel abandoned the name of Mohammed, because

almost everyone he came to know anything of in Biskra seemed to be a Mohammed—proved himself a lively companion, full of correct and incorrect information. But he was more than that. Apparently he was deeply religious. At the appointed times for prayer, when the voice of the muezzin rose from the minarets of the mosques, he prayed, wherever they were, whatever they were doing, without shame or self-consciousness, with a simplicity and abnegation that touched the heart of the former curate of Upper Green. Here was a man not ashamed of prayer, who bowed his head to the earth in submission to the will of Allah, then rose to his feet, smiling, and gaily took up again the life of the day. Remembering the difficulty he had found in saying his prayers at a public school in the dormitory and later on in enduring the accusation of being 'pi' at the university, Noel was filled with respect for this public acknowledgment of devotion to the Creator. Yet it was combined with a freedom of opinion in respect of what Noel considered immorality which it was difficult to reconcile with any suspicion of sanctity. For in the evening, after these fervent prayers, Taha insisted on leading Noel to the haunts of the Ouled Nails in the street of the dancers, whom he praised as girls beautiful like the moon; who, he cheerfully informed Noel, were in Biskra to earn their living as prostitutes, and who, when they had amassed sufficient gold coins, would return to their *tribu* on camel back to settle down in comfort as thoroughly respected married women.

Their posturing—Noel could not consider it dancing—to the sound of flute, shrieking pipe, darabouka, and tom-tom seemed to Noel outrageous. But Taha and the crowd of attentive desert men watched it with an absorbed gravity that almost resembled idolatry, and when Noel expressed his astonishment that such a public performance should be allowed, they were quite evidently unable to enter into his feelings.

"They very sweet women. Great friends of mine."

And he made Noel press a silver coin on the greasy forehead presented to him by the moonfaced houri who had fixed her attention upon him.

"She hopin you likin her. Very pleased to go with an Englishman!"

"As if I——"

"She likin you very much!" interrupted Taha. "She thinkin you very beautiful man!"

And to his amazement, combined with a feeling of keen self-rebuke, Noel felt like one who had received an undeserved compliment.

"What is happening to me here?" he asked himself that night in his almost monastic bedroom. "These awful women covered with paint and leading such sinful lives!"

But it all seemed still like a sort of strange dream. For he was still drunk with the desert air in which Biskra was drowned and was drowning him.

"I'm not myself!" he asserted silently as he pulled on his pyjamas and lay down on the hard little bed.

He blew out the candle on the night table. And then in the darkness, still as in a dream, he saw the tall figure of Taha praying in the garden of Count Landon and the painted girls covered with gold coins making indecent movements in the midst of the staring desert men. And there seemed to be nothing really wrong in Taha's mingling of prayer with a smiling acceptance of what in Upper Green certainly would seem to everyone to be abominable immorality. He was a good fellow who was just 'different.' And

even the painted dancing girls might have virtues, though Noel had no idea what they were. Different they, too, certainly were from the maidens he had known at Upper Green. That was how it was! These people of the desert were 'different.' The Creator had created all sorts and conditions of men. And women too! Yes, obviously of women. And one mustn't, though an English clergyman, be too censorious. No! Not too censorious! And then the white eyelids came down over the serious eyes, and Noel sank into the lovely Saharan sleep.

With the morning came new experiences which tried the nerves of our man from Upper Green. When Noel went out of the hotel clad in his light African clothes—he thought of them as African, though he had bought them in an Oxford Street shop in London—and wearing a soft brown, not black, hat, he was met at once by Taha who, after greeting him, said:

"What about ridin to-day? I takin you out in the desert to the Hammam Salahine. If you like you takin bath and eatin your lunch on the roof."

"Oh—well—how far is it?" asked Noel, stammering slightly and feeling very uncomfortable.

"Not far. Just a nice ride. You likin camels?"

Noel's imagination called up the vision of a huge dromedary he had once seen in the London Zoological Gardens.

"Camels! No. I think not."

"Then I bring in two very good horses. You right. Horses much better than camels for a short ride. You waitin here. In a few minutes I comin back."

"But——" began Noel.

He meant to explain that he had no riding things with him. But Taha was already striding away.

In one brought up and accustomed to riding it is impossible to imagine what the thought of it means to a delicate and completely unsporting man who has never been on a horse and who doesn't know on which side to get up into the saddle, or how to hold the reins when he's there. Left abruptly alone, Noel was gnawed by an acute nervousness that seemed to be concentrated in the pit of his stomach. He could not remain still under the arcade before the hotel, so he crossed the road and began to walk uneasily to and fro in the public garden which faced it.

The horse cure, it seemed, was upon him.

As he walked slowly up and down on the pale path under the motionless trees—there was no wind that day, though there is often wind in Biskra—he felt almost exactly as many a man feels in a dentist's waiting-room when he knows that almost everything is wrong with his teeth. His thin trousers! Can a man ride a horse in thin trousers? No; surely not. There is such a thing as 'riding kit.' One can't ride without it. A ray of light seemed to break through the darkness of his mind. Delay! There would have to be delay while a tailor was making his riding kit. He would explain to Taha. Taha would understand. Impossible to ride till one had riding things.

He started. He had heard behind him the beat of hooves on the hard road before the hotel. He swivelled round and saw Taha mounted on a white horse and leading another horse, brown, by the bridle. And Taha was not in riding kit.

Noel looked at the brown horse as a man looks at a powerful enemy, and

his heart seemed to sink down to the white canvas shoes he was wearing. Nevertheless, walking slowly—it was almost like creeping—he went towards Taha and the horses.

Taha drew up and leaped to the ground with, Noel thought, an almost panther-like movement.

"The brown horse for you. Very good horse!"

He turned the horses round till they faced in the direction of the station from which he had come. The brown horse pirouetted, threw up its head in a manner which for Noel held a menace, and uttered a piercing neigh.

It was a stallion.

"He not needin a whip!"

"No; I should think not."

Noel was standing in the road on the horse's off side.

"No. I see that. But—but I can't ride to-day."

"Why not? Him very fine horse. Belong to a sheikh!"

Noel thought with horror of *The Sheikh's Revenge*. In that wild story of desert life the sheikh and his followers were for ever galloping frantically over the sands intent on adventure and heedless of life. But he wasn't a sheikh. He was an English clergyman, and he hadn't got riding kit.

"It isn't that," he said, trying to speak with firmness. "But I can't ride in these trousers. I must have special things made."

"Nonsense! Here! You holdin the horses! I gettin some string to tie up your trousers."

And he thrust a tangle of reins into Noel's startled hands and bolted into the hotel.

Instantly the two horses drew back as if anxious to get as far away from Noel as possible, like creatures shunning an unclean thing. He uttered an anxious cluck. He had a notion that horses had to be clucked at. So he clucked and dragged at the bridles. The horses evidently resented the sound, for they showed rows of long yellow teeth and continued to jib, pulling Noel along with them.

"So there! So there!" he cried. "So there! Quiet! Quiet!"

No sooner had Noel uttered the magic word 'Quiet!' than the brown horse broke away from him and with a terrific clatter of hooves bolted off in the direction of the station, while the white horse began to turn round, as Noel described it later in a letter to an English friend, like himself no horseman, 'as if it were a Catherine wheel.'

"Hold up!" cried Noel, revolving with it in a frenzied manner. "Hold up, Dobbin!"

Some Arab vagrants wandering idly in the sunshine, hearing his cries and the uproar of horses' hooves on the hard road, paused to enjoy the spectacle, but offered no help, and just as Noel was about to relinquish the bridle and give the indignant animal liberty Taha rushed out of the hotel, holding a knife and a ball of string.

"What the devil you doin?" he shouted. "Give him his head!"

"I'm giving it him!" cried Noel. "I've been giving it him all the time!"

Taha cast away knife and string, leaped at the horse, and snatched the bridle from Noel's despairing fingers.

"Where the other? What you doin with the other?"

"The other's gone home."

Taha uttered a soft hissing sound and let the bridle go loose, though still

keeping a firm grasp upon it. The horse ceased to revolve, and his yellow teeth disappeared as his lips closed over them. Then he stood still.

"I be damned !" observed Taha. "Why you pullin at him like that ?"

"I didn't. He was pulling at me."

"If you goin on like that better riding a donkey."

This remark touched Noel on the raw. He felt that his African reputation was at stake and that unless he at once made a stand he would be dishonoured for ever in the eyes of the whole of Biskra.

"I refuse to ride a donkey," he said loudly.

"Then you gettin up on this horse," said Taha in a quieter voice. "And we goin and findin the other."

"But my trousers !"

Taha turned to a Negro who stood by with his thick lips extended in an enormous grin and uttered a command in Arabic. The Negro took hold of the bridle.

"Now you gettin up !" he said to Noel, who almost fiercely extended his right foot with the earnest intention of mounting at once on the wrong side.

The Negro broke into a succulent roar of laughter.

"That not the way to get up," cried Taha, apparently outraged.

"What other way can I get up ?"

"Goin round !"

"Round what—where ?"

Taha threw up his dark hands in a gesture of despair. Then he took hold of Noel's arm, led him to the other side of the horse, lifted his left foot, thrust it into the stirrup, after putting him in the orthodox position for mounting, and said :

"Now you jumpin ! And puttin other leg over."

Noel summoned his courage, gave a jump, lost the stirrup, and arrived on the horse in a sprawl, with some of him facing towards its tail.

The laughter of the Negro was now loud in the land, and it was echoed by the select gathering of natives in the arcade.

"I be damned !" again observed Taha, as the horrified horse made a stern protest with both its hind legs. "Where you thinkin you goin ?"

"I'm not thinking at all !" gasped Noel. "I——"

He was stopped by Taha, who almost brutally arranged the whole of him in the orthodox position facing the animal's head.

"There ! That how you sittin ! Now takin the reins."

He thrust them into Noel's left hand which closed on them nervelessly.

"Now sittin quiet and I tyin your trousers."

He reached for the string and the knife, which had been impounded by an eager Arab child of tender years, and set to work on Noel's left trouser leg, while the jubilant Negro still kept the horse moderately quiet.

"There !"

He tied the string tightly, went round to the other leg, and performed a similar operation on that.

"Now we findin the other horse. You givin yours his head !"

"I'll try to," faltered Noel, gripping the front of the saddle with one hand and holding a mess of reins in the other. "I'll do my best. Are you going to lead him ?"

Taha shook his dark head till the rose over his left ear waggled.

"If you goin on this way you never ride like an Arab !"



"Then don't lead him. I'll try. I'll manage somehow. But I've never been on a horse till to-day."

"I be damned!" observed Taha once more in an almost stupefied voice.

And the procession moved off towards the station.

On that memorable day Noel awoke from his Biskra dream and for the first time began to face the stern realities of life, hinted at in Wimpole Street by Doctor Rutherford Craven.

'He must live a roughish outdoor life, a man's, not a curate's, life.'

That had been the medical command, the second half of which had gravely offended Noel when he had heard it. He remembered it now and thought differently about it.

As, convoyed by Taha, he proceeded on horseback through the desert towards the brown hills which made a background to the Hammam Salahine, grasping the saddle with one hand and struggling to keep a hold on the reins with the other, he ground his teeth more than once and said to himself:

'I am doing it. I am living a rough life now. This is *not* a curate's life, whatever it is.'

The white Arab steed he endeavoured to bestride took care of that. It moved as if on springs. Its hooves seemed more often in the air than on the ground. Its white body seemed to be the chosen home of electricity. Its jaws were never still, but champed as if in a ceaseless effort to get rid of the bridle. The hind part of the animal from time to time rose abruptly like a mountainous wave of the sea, throwing Noel violently towards a flung-back head that resented his challenge. When he pulled at the reins the creature increased its pace to a gallop; when he let them go loose he had a dreadful feeling that it meditated a roll on the sands. And it shied.

They came on some goats, and it leaped sideways as if in terror, causing Noel to lose a stirrup.

"Him not likin goats," observed Taha calmly, while Noel tried to throw an arm round the animal's neck.

A little way farther on they came upon the prostrate form of an Arab fallen asleep in the folds of his djelabiah. The horse stopped abruptly, trembled all over and refused to go on.

"Him thinkin him dead," remarked Taha. "Him not likin dead peoples."

"But what am I to do? I can't stay here all day," wailed Noel.

Taha let out a furious shout. The form under the djelabiah stirred, and from its folds came into view a black head, a pair of rolling eyes, and a mouth stretched in a yawn.

"Now you kickin him!" said Taha. "And him goin on."

Noel tapped the horse's flanks gently with the heels of his canvas shoes, and the brute bounded forward as if possessed of the devil. Farther on, not far from the bathhouse, a patch of sulphur water trickling through saltpetre crossed their path, and again the horse was brought to a standstill, so sudden that Noel was nearly flung over its suddenly lowered head.

"Him not likin see water!" stated Taha with sympathy.

"What *does* he like to see?" exclaimed Noel in desperation. "He seems to be frightened of seeing everything."

"*Him* not frightened; *you* frightened. You makin him frightened. Him feelin you through the saddle tremblin. If *you* not frightened then *him* not frightened."

"It isn't him that feels me; it's me that feels him," said Noel with weak defiance, throwing pure English to the four winds.

"When him gettin 'customed to you p'r'aps him likin you better," said Taha doubtfully. "We ridin together every mornin and him gettin to know you."

"What an awful prospect!" thought Noel, as at last before the entrance to the yellowish-white bathhouse he half crawled, half fell down from the horse's back.

But then immediately there came to him an unaccustomed sensation. He did not give it a name. But it was a sensation of masculine satisfaction.

"I'm a horseman! I've ridden here on a very difficult, even dangerous Arab horse, and I haven't fallen off it once—*yet*."

And feeling thus triumphant, though rather arthritic, he made an effort to stride athletically into the bathhouse, and, refusing to plunge at once into a bath that smelled like rotten eggs, he demanded an instant lunch on the roof.

The fat Frenchwoman who kept the baths supplied him with a passable omelette, a bit of cold mutton, a wedge of hard and mysterious cheese, a tin of sardines, some Arab bread, some oranges, a glass of thin beer, and a cup of thick and very sweet coffee, which he ate and drank crouched on a cheap Oriental carpet in the eye of the sun. Taha was below, gossiping with the bathman, a pale Kabyle from the region sonorously named La Grande Kabylie. Noel was left to himself. And when he had finished his meal he leaned back against the low parapet of the flat roof, lit a cigarette, and 'let himself go.' That was how he felt this giving of himself up to repose in the African sun, in this desert place after the hard exercise of the ride.

He looked vaguely down over the parapet on to a sort of marsh covered with a deposit of some bluish substance, left by the stream of salt and sulphurous water, which was fed by the boiling-hot spring at the base of the pale brown hills. Masses of iron ore lay around. Here and there some tall reeds moved in the gentle breeze. A sandpiper rose from among them and flew away in the direction of Biskra. Saltpetre lay like snow on either side of the desert track by which they had gained the bathhouse. The sound of Arab voices rose up from below, and now and then the shuffling of horses' hooves upon rubble.

An extraordinary feeling of far-away took hold of Noel, drowsy almost and faintly delightful. He had shed all the familiar things as a snake casts its skin: his parochial duties, his social observances, even, he felt just then, much more than these, his curiously narrow outlook on life. Hitherto, it seemed to him then, he had seen, had felt, life as something small, in comparison with what he was beginning to feel it to be now. He looked down on a curiously pale and an empty world, full of faint yellows, faint blues, faint greens, faint browns, and a whiteness like the whiteness of snow. The sun blazed over all. Behind him were hills. Before him stretched a beginning of vastness, of the gigantic spaces of the Sahara beyond the palm trees, the olives, the pomegranates, the orange trees of Biskra. Into that vastness he must presently go by command of a doctor. And he knew no one there. No friend was waiting to welcome him. No one's face would light up at his coming. There was something stupendous to him in the prospect. Yet he didn't now feel afraid of it. Perhaps he was being guided. Perhaps he was greatly in need of development. He thought of the low walls of the pulpit in the Upper Green church, of the admonitions he had delivered from

it to hearers apparently attentive. Had there been much meaning in those words of his? Could they have done much good? Did he know yet enough of life to do any real good among those around him? Did he know almost anything about life in the general sense? At Upper Green he had not asked himself these questions. They came up in his mind now, and the knowledge he had gained at school and at Oxford and, later, in his comparatively short clerical life seemed diminished in his view of it. He had sometimes thought of it with a good deal of pleasure, even with something of pride. Where was that pride now?

He had been greatly humbled that day by his total ignorance of everything belonging to horsemanship. He remembered the succulent laugh of the Negro before the hotel. He remembered the obvious entertainment of the group of natives in the arcade when he tried to mount on the wrong side of the horse and then sprawled on its back almost facing its tail. How impotent and ashamed he had felt! Yet how much more he knew than all those who had laughed at him—yes—knew in *his* way. But what a little he knew and what a narrow life he had lived. And how strange was the complete satisfaction he had felt in it. There was in him now no satisfaction. But in its stead there was beginning to be a sharp eagerness to learn a new way of life.

The emptiness of the scene he was looking down on was suddenly changed. On the route by which he had come to the bathhouse appeared a small native caravan, humble pilgrims in search of healing making their way to *le bain des saints*. One camel gave a touch of weary dignity to their progress. Upon this summit, under a ragged species of palanquin, swayed a family group of women and children, crowded together in a muddle of coloured rags. A few very small donkeys pattered onward slowly below and around it, bearing male Arabs, some sitting sideways, others astride, all of them busily and mechanically kicking their feet to and fro. Some more women and girls, in filthy raiment, wandered beside them, bearing mysterious burdens on their heads from which fluttered streamers of cotton. Their faces were unveiled, though here and there one held a fragment of the cotton between her white teeth, in such a way that it covered one side of her countenance. A few goats and two or three dogs, yellow and white, made up the party, with a small flock of brown sheep.

Noel stood up to examine all this more attentively.

Nomads, evidently, he thought. On each side of the camel was fastened a multitude of mysterious belongings, the household goods, no doubt, of the pilgrims. A multitude—yes, but how little was needed for the nomadic way of life.

One of the horses neighed shrilly. Was it the white horse or the brown? An ugly realization broke Noel's interest in the caravan. To get back to Biskra he would have to mount the white horse. And how was he going to manage it before all these people? They were stopping now, were grouping themselves round the bathhouse. The groan of the camel being forced to lie down under its heavy burden rose up from below. And then Taha appeared.

"What about goin now? You ready?"

"In a moment!" said Noel. "In a moment!"

Taha waited.

"I'll join you downstairs,"

"The horses quite ready,"

"Go down and I'll join you."

Looking slightly surprised, Taha sauntered away. When he was alone Noel bent his mind almost fiercely on the problem of mounting.

"Let's see! I must mount on the horse's right side as you face his head. No, that's wrong. I must go round and begin with the left foot turned rather towards his tail. But not too much, or else if I lose the stirrup in jumping I might come down looking the wrong way. What a nuisance that all those nomads are there!"

"The horses quite ready! You comin'?" cried Taha's voice from below.

Noel compressed his lips till he hoped he looked as masculine and non-chalant as a sheikh, tapped his thigh with the small fly whisk he had brought with him, put it back in his jacket pocket, from which its bright blue tuft of hair peeped out, and went boldly down from the roof. He was confronted at once by the throng of nomads, the kneeling camel, the goats, the sheep, and the dogs. Also the very fat woman who presided over the bath-house had come out on to the step to see him mount, accompanied by the Kabyle masseur. And of course Taha was there holding his enemy, who uttered a neigh, either of greeting or protest. Noel could not tell which. Still compressing his lips, and casting a stern manly glance at the crowd, he prepared to go round his horse to the proper side for mounting. But Taha stopped him.

"You goin away without payin Madame for your lunch!"

"Oh—I forgot! Pardon, madame!"

He felt in his pockets for money. Immediately the nomads closed round him with outstretched hands and clamouring voices.

"*Combien, madame, s'il vous plaît?* Imshi! Imshi! I tell you!"

The fat lady murmured a price.

"Imshi! Imshi! Roh! Roh!"

"*Quinze francs, m'sieu.*"

"*Voilà!* Will you imshi? Taha, tell them to imshi!"

"They all very poor. You rich. You givin them somethin!"

"Should I?"

Frantically he scattered some coins. The nomads fell upon them like beasts of prey.

"Now they fightin! Why not givin it nicely like gentleman? Then they not fightin."

"It's my money. I give it as I choose. If they fight that's not my fault. Now then."

Summoning up all his courage, he turned to his enemy.

"*Au revoir, m'sieu!*"

"*Oh—adieu, madame!*"

"*Quel beau cheval! Monsieur est bon cavalier?*"

"*Oh oui! Oh oui!*"

"*Alors à bientôt!*"

Calling on his memory, and feeling like a desperate public character under the close observation of a difficult world, Noel strode to his horse, avoided a kick by darting aside, thrust his left foot into the dangling stirrup, seized the horse's mane with his left hand, the edge of the saddle with his right, jumped, and came heavily down in the saddle with his face set in the right direction.

"*En avant!*" he cried fiercely.

"Better takin the reins !" counselled Taha.

"Oh, to be sure !"

He gathered up the reins, gave a cluck, and the white horse galloped away, with him holding fast to the saddle.

What might have been a catastrophe, but strangely enough proved to be just the contrary, occurred at the close of Noel's first expedition on horseback and first experience of the horse cure recommended by Doctor Rutherford Craven. The white horse, startled, no doubt, by Noel's imperious descent into the saddle, went off at a gallop from the Hammam Salahine's door and continued to gallop all the way home to Biskra, where, instead of returning to the Hôtel du Sahara to take leave of its rider, it made straight for its stable yard near the station. On arrival there it stopped dead before the door of its stable, stood still while Noel let go of the saddle and disentangled his left hand from the reins, and then with one mighty buck, in which appeared to be concentrated all its distaste of him and acute disapproval of his methods of horsemanship, got rid of him.

Noel rose in the air. This was inevitable. But then a miracle occurred. And what he did to bring it about he never knew. Perhaps he unconsciously sent up a prayer to the god of chance, mechanically straightened his legs in mid-air. For he came down on his feet in a standing position before the astonished eyes of the French proprietor of the stable and a Negro helper, and before they had time to express any opinion on his and the horse's behaviour walked up to the former and said in French :

"How much do I owe if you please ?"

For a moment the proprietor merely sucked his enormous moustaches. Then as Noel firmly repeated the question he mentioned a sum. Noel instantly took out of his pocket a note for the amount, paid it, and with a very casual *au revoir* walked out of the yard as if nothing unusual had happened.

"I came down on my feet !"

That was his exultant thought as he walked, rather like a cavalry man recovering from rheumatic fever, towards his hotel.

"I was thrown, but I came down on my feet. Not many men could have done that. I wish Doctor Rutherford Craven had seen me."

Honest pride filled his soul. His back ached. His limbs were stiff. His whole body yearned for a hot bath with a good handful of soda strewed in it. But he was proud of himself. The skill with which he had come down to earth compensated for all the humiliation and nervous alarm of the day. His body had proved itself clever in the critical moment, amazingly clever. From that day on he was fortified by a belief, which he never expressed, in his physical self. A man who could stick on a horse like that till the very end of his ride and finish up in an erect position, firm on his feet though unseated, was more than an ordinary curate. He was a man to be reckoned with. Self-confidence was suddenly born in him, and when eventually Taha appeared at the Hôtel du Sahara and said,

"Whatever you leavin me like that for ? Why not waitin for me ? When I gettin up on my horse you gone 'way," he replied,

"I expected you to come with me. I prefer to ride at a quick pace."

"I be damned !" muttered Taha, rolling his eyes.

He was silent for a moment, then said :

"Monsieur Moïse at the stable tellin me the horse buckin you off."

"I beg your pardon. I rode to the stable to leave my horse, and there I—dismounted."

"How you remembrin where the horse livin?"

"I did not remember. But he showed me."

"Who showin you?"

"The horse. Now I'm going to take a bath and then I shall rest. I shan't need you again to-day."

And he dismissed Taha, feeling that he had earned, if not Taha's admiration, at least his surprised respect.

That night, in spite of his aching limbs and mental excitement, he slept even more profoundly than usual. When he woke up the light was already brilliant and the village had been awake for some hours. He looked at his watch. Past nine o'clock. He stretched and realized that the stiffness had not yet left his body. A comforting thought came to him.

'I can't possibly ride to-day.'

Was it a coward's thought? As he turned out of bed and began his toilet he asked himself the question. No surely. It was merely awareness of a fact. Having begun to lead a rough life—so he thought of the yesterday—he meant to persist in it, to go through with it. If he didn't, couldn't, do that he must give up the whole thing—by that he meant Africa—and go back to the Upper Green life; led perhaps no more at Upper Green, but essentially the same sort of life. Did he want to do that? He considered this with severity, resolved to dig down to the very truth of himself, while he brushed his hair and examined his face in the small square mirror that was nailed to the whitewashed wall of his room. There were still two patches of red on his cheekbones, but the rest of his face was no longer so pale as it had been. A strong suspicion of brown was beginning to invade it. He thought of Doctor Craven's words, "a real devil of a fellow and as brown as a berry." Was it possible that such a description could ever apply to him? He put down his brushes and squared his shoulders. How extraordinary, how marvellous, if he ever developed into that! As brown as a berry? In North Africa that must be possible. But a devil of a fellow? How could he even wish to be that? And yet . . .

Unless Taha lied, that Ouled Nail girl, on whose greasy brow he had pressed a coin, considered him a very beautiful man. Did she perhaps also think that on closer acquaintance he might prove to be a devil of a fellow? She would be very disappointed if their acquaintance ever ripened. But of course it never would ripen. A poor lost Oriental creature like that could never make friends with a man of his calibre, with a clergyman. The mere thought of such a thing was not only impious but absurd. It ought never even to have occurred to him. No. But somehow at that moment he realized he didn't want to go back to Upper Green. His state of health wouldn't allow of that. But neither would his state of mind. He still coughed, but rather less often than in England. There seemed already a slight improvement. The wonderful air was perhaps doing him good. He must go on. He must give it a trial. But he must not settle down at Biskra. The doctor had told him to go farther south. To that place called Too-something. He must get hold of the name. He must enquire of Taha about it. And he picked up his guidebook and went down to his breakfast.

When he got into the dining-room he felt ravenous and ordered eggs, two boiled eggs, toast and butter and coffee, plenty of coffee with milk.

"And I'll have it on one of those tables in the arcade, please."

While he was out there eating and drinking with relish, Taha appeared and looked at him curiously.

"How you this mornin, sir?"

"Splendid!"

"You ridin again to-day?"

"No. But I'll ride to-morrow. I must have a rest to-day. Look here! Do you know of a place called Touggourt, more south than this?"

Taha smiled.

"Do I knowin? I knowin it like my pocket."

"Tell me something about it."

"Touggourt the belly of the desert."

"Dear me!" said Noel, startled and dropping his egg-spoon.

"Why you droppin your spoon like that?"

Noel quickly resumed his breakfast.

"You wantin to go to Touggourt?"

"Yes. I intend to go there."

"Now?"

"Very soon. Not to-day but quite soon."

"Takin me with you?"

"That depends. Possibly."

From that moment Taha was entirely Noel's. His slightly critical attitude towards the Englishman, born of mental comparison between him and the hardy British sportsman who had formerly been his patron in Africa, was abated. This new patron's horsemanship was peculiar. That couldn't be denied. But if he intended to go into the belly of the desert and to take Taha with him he must be respected, even kowtowed to. And from that moment Taha began to kowtow. A fair number of travelling Europeans dribbled into Biskra in the course of the year, but very few went farther south. There was no railway to Touggourt in those days. The journey there had to be made either by diligence on a very rough piste, or on horse- or camel-back. Few undertook it. Even Taha's former patron had never been there but had contented himself with hunting gazelle in the plain of El Outaya and moufflon in the Aurès Mountains. This pale, thin, and apparently rather feeble newcomer, with the tiny patches of red on his cheekbones, was evidently more enterprising than he looked. Taha began to revise his estimate of 'Mister Nowill.' And this altered attitude fortified Noel's resolve to 'go through with it.'

On the morrow, overcoming the nervous anxiety that still beset him when doing unaccustomed things that required physical energy and aptitudes foreign to him, Noel rode again on the white horse and managed a little better than before, especially in the matter of mounting. Taha gave him instruction in regard to the reins and, but always with respect, a number of hints about horsemanship. One mustn't turn out one's toes to the east and the west or to the north and the south. One mustn't keep hold of the saddle when trotting or hang desperately on to the reins when going at a gallop. One must sit up, not crouch over the horse's neck when moving at a moderate pace, and not be too slack with the knees and thighs.

Noel listened attentively and did his best to obey. And he showed perseverance and the beginning of 'grit.'

He had now definitely decided against a return to the Upper Green life and, having done so, felt that there was no alternative but to conquer the new mode of life. It would, it must, take time, perhaps a very long time,

but evidently Doctor Rutherford Craven had thought that such a victory could be gained. And he had been drastic about his patient's condition. Noel hadn't forgotten the hint of contempt in his voice when he had said :

"You may be a whole curate, but you're only half a man."

It had stung Noel then. The remembrance of it stung him now. He set his teeth and resolved, almost fiercely in his way, to become a whole man, of course combining that with remaining a whole curate. It never occurred to him as possible that in time some, or even perhaps the whole, of the curate might be swallowed up by the new man, if that new man made his appearance.

A week later one morning Taha remarked :

"Monsieur Nowill, you gettin on much better now with your ridin."

Noel almost blushed with pleasure and pride. But he only said in an offhand he-man sort of way :

"Glad you think so, Taha."

"Now you ridin better you wantin breeches, not string round your trousers."

"I'll get some. You know a place?"

"Suttinly! I takin your measure."

And he took it, and in a couple of days the breeches were ready. Noel liked himself in them and found riding easier in them than in trousers. His legs gripped the saddle more firmly.

"You lookin fine now!" said Taha. "When we startin for Touggourt?"

"Any day," said Noel. "But I shall hate leaving Biskra."

"Touggourt much better. Real desert there."

"But it's real enough here."

"Touggourt is belly of desert."

"Dear me!"

"Big sand hills! And the women of Touggourt much better than here. Many women, and they doin the dance of the hands, and they——"

"I'm not going to Touggourt for women," said Noel, almost sternly.

"You not likin women?" said Taha in blank astonishment.

"We won't discuss that. Now how are we to get to Touggourt? How far is it?"

"If we takin the diligence, two days' journey. If we ridin on horse, four days. Ridin much better than drivin, and lookin much better."

"Why?"

"More like Arab man. Only poor people and men sellin things goin by diligence. And much more tirin. You sittin on hard seats every day fifteen hours, and piste very bad. Ridin you startin when you likin. In diligence startin every day in the dark. All black. You very sleepy. You got revolver?"

"No."

"I gettin you one to-day and one for myself."

"Why? Is it dangerous?"

"Many bad people in the desert. Man in desert without revolver or gun like bird in the air without wings. You shootin straight?"

All his life Noel had been an exceedingly truthful man. Never in his life had he fired anything. But something in Taha's steady gaze moved him to prevaricate. And he answered curtly :

"Just average."

"Then we ridin and takin revolvers."



"But the luggage?"

"I hirin camel. Sendin it all by camel. You leavin it all to me. I seein to everythin. You gettin it ready. The camel him startin early to-morrow."

And without further parley he made off, leaving Noel with a feeling that now he was very definitely 'in for it.'

A revolver! How did one deal with a revolver? He had no idea. But he must try to keep his ignorance secret from Taha. And now to pack for the camel! As he went upstairs he said to himself:

'Wouldn't it be much wiser to travel by diligence?'

But he didn't dare to suggest this to Taha. He must travel along the path he had begun to tread. He must live firmly up to the conception Taha was just beginning to have of him. A camel—revolvers. This was indeed desert life. What would Upper Green think of all this?

On the following day Taha appeared before the hotel with a handsome white camel and two camel men, who looked to Noel like bandits, but who were, he was assured, very good men whose shining virtues had been known to Taha for many years. Noel's luggage was fastened on to the protesting beast, and Noel watched it moving away slowly, till it disappeared southwards at the end of the street where the Ouled Nail girls plied their trade.

His poor little belongings, his meagre all—except the small dressing-case he would take with the horses—disappearing to the Sahara. A sudden feeling of extreme loneliness came upon him like an ice-cold hand, the hand of Destiny. He must in a very few days follow those poor belongings with, as his only companion, Taha. And then? Months in the desert. Four or five months at least. In late April the heat in and near Touggourt would become unendurable to an unaccustomed Englishman, and Noel had been told that towards the end of that month fever often broke out and made great ravages among the natives. He would have to come north at latest in early May. But till then he must live somehow in that far-away place, out of reach of the railway, which made Biskra seem civilized, with no friends to lighten the burden of shining hours in the day or bring intimacy into the darkness of night. If only he had even one good friend with him everything would seem different, bearable. Feeling profoundly sad, he went up to his bedroom, pulled his writing things out of his dressing-case, and sat down to write to an old Oxford chum, the Reverend Alfred Bedell, now curate in charge of a church in Essex. That perhaps would relieve his heart. And he had just written

MY DEAR ALFRED,

*Here I am in the Sahara and beginning to feel very lonely . . .*

when Taha knocked at his door and announced:

"I buyin you two fine revolvers and plenty of bullets. We goin out in the desert and seein how they workin. Come along, Mister Nowill."

And Noel had to put the despondent curate aside and show the bold front of the sporting he-man keen as mustard on the weapons of destruction.

Taha led him to a patch of waste ground some hundreds of yards beyond the station, bounded to the north by a hillock of dried earth. In front of this hillock he erected a sort of hastily improvised scarecrow, composed of a couple of sticks driven into the ground with some fragments of rag stretched across them. On one of the sticks he perched a battered old hat which he

had procured from the owner of the stable before whom Noel had alighted after being bucked off his horse.

"We firin at that."

"What is the hat for?" asked Noel anxiously.

"Like man. You hit him you hittin a man. Here! I loadin for you."

Noel watched with intensity Taha's preparation of the revolver. When the magazine was full and the safety catch fixed Taha handed it to Noel, who received it with reverential precaution.

"When you ready to fire you pullin the trigger hard and try hittin the hat, or somethin."

"Ah!" said Noel, holding the revolver at arm's length, pointing in the direction of the hat, and making a guess, fortunately correct, at the trigger.

"He kickin pretty hard, so you best aimin low."

"Exactly," said Noel, who had no idea how a weapon could kick.

"I firin after you," continued Taha, loading his revolver with rapidity, while Noel watched him out of the corners of his eyes. "When I sayin three you firin."

"Certainly!"

He thought Taha would say, "One, two," and then "three!" But he merely said, "Three!" and Noel was caught unprepared and did nothing.

"Why you not firin, Mister Nowill? I sayin three."

"Oh, I beg pardon! I expected one, two."

"Now again! At the ready!"

"Yes!"

"Three!"

Noel shut his eyes and did something to the trigger with all the force of his finger. Something tremendous happened. The revolver seemed to leap upward, and he heard Taha say:

"I be damned! You mighty fine shot!"

He opened his eyes. The hat was gone from the post. He calmly lowered the revolver till it pointed towards the ground.

"That's enough for to-day," he said carelessly. "Now I'll go back to my letter writing."

He handed the revolver to Taha.

"You take one shot with yours if you like. But don't waste the bullets. We may need them in the Sahara."

"You quite right," said Taha submissively. "When you sayin three I firin."

"Three!" said Noel.

Taha fired. The bullet went wild, not even touching the rag stretched between the two posts.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "You shootin better than me!"

"Oh, well! Perhaps you'll do better next time. But you shouldn't say that."

"Not sayin what?"

"Oh, well——" He hesitated, but the he-man got the better of the curate and he ended, "Never mind!"

"I be damned!" rejoined Taha.

By this time Noel's reputation with Taha was beginning to be firmly established. The question was could it be kept up? Noel knew he couldn't really ride, though by showing pluck and will and perhaps also by sheer luck, he had not again been got rid of by the white horse, who seemed indeed

to be getting to dislike him rather less than at first. He knew also that he had no knowledge at all of shooting and had hit the hat in the desert by sheer accident. But Taha's now roused expectation gave him something to live up to. A great responsibility was laid upon him. He had striven to deceive and apparently had succeeded in deceiving Taha on at least two occasions. Now he must carry on the deception if possible. He must never show the white feather, whatever he felt or feared. Secretly he wished ardently to travel to Touggourt by diligence. The diligence went twice a week and, however hard the seat, Noel knew he could drive in a conveyance without tumbling out or becoming completely exhausted. But that enormous journey on the white horse! Could he undertake that? It would indeed be a horse cure, or perhaps a horse kill. But Taha's opinion of him! It must not be lowered. Nevertheless, he did make a feeble attempt to exchange the horses for the diligence.

"It must be terribly tiring for horses to take a long desert journey," he ventured.

"You rather goin on camels?" queried Taha.

"Oh, no! But I fancied perhaps the diligence——"

"The diligence got horses. Much more tirin than when we ridin them."

"Oh, to be sure! I never thought of that."

And his attempt petered out. The die was cast. He must risk the ride. And three days later they started at daybreak.

"We sleepin at Bordj Chegga," said Taha. "In the bordj."

"Is it far?"

"Not too far. We gettin there about five o'clock."

Noel's heart sank. Ten hours at least in the saddle. Could he stick it? He must somehow. But he dreaded the journey.

His dread vanished, however, when they came out at the fringe of the oasis and their horses set their feet on the desert track that led due south into the great Sahara in the wonderful freshness of morning. Just at first, on emerging into the desert, the horses became difficult to manage. The white horse plunged, and Noel's right hand instinctively gripped hold of the saddle.

"Him very pleased to be in the desert," said Taha, whose brown horse also showed signs of excitement.

Noel wished with all his heart that the beast wasn't so pleased. But he only said jerkily:

"Very natural!"

"You givin him his head and he soon gettin quiet. When we reachin Chegga he goin like lamb."

This assurance proved to be true. By the time they rode into Bordj Chegga towards sunset the horses were going quietly at a foot's pace, and Noel, though exceedingly tired, felt not only safe but triumphant.

As they drew near to the bordj, a small white building standing alone near a group of palm trees, Taha suddenly lifted his hand and fired his revolver. Noel started and nearly fell off his horse, which also started feebly.

"You firin too. That let them know we comin and got arms."

"Oh, I think—— Look, there's an Arab! That's enough. I don't want to waste my bullets," said Noel, totally unable for any further effort to play the he-man.

"P'r'aps you right. Yes, they seein us! Him gettin the key!"

And the tattered Arab, who seemed to have sprung out of nowhere, drew a huge key from under his patched djelabiah and awaited them by the bordj.

Noel had great difficulty in keeping an upright position when he reached the ground, but he still felt triumphant and more of a man than he had ever felt before in his life. Now for a comfortable rest. Now for sweet repose stretched out at full length on—something. Not a sofa, of course. But anything soft and possible. The great key was turned ; the palm-wood door dragged open, and Noel entered an entirely bare room with whitewashed walls and a brick floor.

"Why, where's the furniture ?" he exclaimed.

"What you mean ?" asked Taha, astonished.

"The furniture ? A bed, chairs, a table, a washstand ?"

"Not havin all that in a bordj."

"But what shall I sleep on then ?"

"P'r'aps we gettin a mat to put on the floor."

He spoke to the Arab gutturally.

"No, he not havin a mat. We just lyin on the floor."

"We ! But what shall we put our heads on ?"

"You got your small bit luggage," said Taha, laying it down against the white wall in a corner. "You puttin your head on that and lyin on your jacket. You sleepin very well. Like log."

"Where did you learn that ?"

"My master, him often sayin it—'I sleepin like log.'"

And actually Nøel did sleep marvellously, a sleep of healthy exhaustion, after eating a tough chicken, some couscous, dry cheese, Arab bread, and dates, washed down with a glass of goat's milk. Taha slept in the opposite corner of the room with his head completely muffled in his djelabiah, but not before he had smoked a pipe, which Noel thought contained tobacco but which had been fitted with keef. In those days Noel was innocent of any knowledge of keef.

Just before lying down in his corner Noel had gone out for a few minutes alone in the night, after promising Taha to keep close to the bordj, because "they very bad peoples in Chegga." He saw no people, bad or good. Not a creature was stirring. The horses had been led away. He knew not where. The night was perfectly still. There was no moon, but the multitudes of stars and their brightness amazed him. He heard dogs barking, but apparently not very near. There must be a village not far off, but he could not see it. The brown houses were merged in the night. But the three palm trees stood out like stark sentinels watching over the snow-white bordj. On all sides the desert stretched away into the darkness. Not sandy, not perfectly flat, but desert of hard dry earth, wrinkled and cracked, and strewn with small stones. The air was exquisitely fresh and cool. Later in the night Noel guessed that it would be perhaps cold and wondered whether he would be warm enough under the overcoat which he had brought with him strapped to the saddle.

He heard a faint coughing from inside the bordj. Though he did not then know it, keef was the cause of it. Seized by the strange spirit of physical imitation, he echoed the cough, suddenly aware of the weakness which had brought him to this African solitude. Then again the almost mystical silence fell around him, only disturbed now and then by the faint barking of dogs.

Standing perfectly still, he silently said his prayers. They were not his usual prayers. They were not conventional prayers. They were vague. He said his prayers in his thought of them, but afterwards it seemed to him that they had been wordless, a mere aspiration, a stretching out of the soul towards the Being who had created the desert and led him into it for the healing of his body and perhaps also for something else. And yet had not a suspicion of paganism crept through him since he had crossed over the sea and come into the continent that is sometimes called 'dark'? Things that would certainly have shocked him greatly in Upper Green scarcely shocked him out here. They seemed somehow to 'belong' here. He was getting the feeling increasingly that they were natural, even perhaps inevitable in Africa. A world sensation, never once felt by him in England, was gradually obtaining upon him. Into what state of soul—Noel believed in the 'soul' implicitly—would it lead him? If Doctor Craven was right in his prognosis he would become a new man because of what he was doing, or rather was beginning to do, here. But a new man in the body might, surely would, mean a new man in another way. A phrase came vaguely up in his mind: 'They shall be changed as a garment.' Something strange, terrible almost, in that. But how tremendously interesting! How wonderful to be subject to the great law of change!

Again the faint cough came to him from the keef smoker, reminding him of his own state of health. He must go in. It was surely getting colder—the marvellous air! He mustn't forget his condition. He was, according to Doctor Craven, consumptive. He looked up once more at the stars; was amazed once more at their brilliance, at their aspect of personality. Then he turned in.

Starting early next morning, they rode on to an oasis called M'reier. Here they were bestowed in an auberge kept by a Frenchman, the only European in the place, and met a handful of travellers who had arrived before them in the diligence from Biskra. No women were among them.

Noel fed with these people: a Maltese commercial traveller, two Frenchmen, also in the commercial 'line,' and a very corpulent and self-possessed Arab, who was a Caïd and proprietor of date palmeries in the region of Touggourt. Taha kissed his shoulder with profound respect and presented Noel to him, whispering that he was 'much greater man than any sheikh. Sheikh nothin beside him.'

The Caïd was exceedingly affable but exceedingly incoherent. He claimed a complete knowledge of French and was conversational. But Noel, unable to comprehend almost any word of the many words that poured out between the dense thickets of his black beard and moustache, was reduced to intense looks of intelligence and ejaculations of agreement with all that he said; and even exclaimed "*Oui, oui!*" when the Caïd asked him if he had more wives than one, a reply that was received with majestic appreciation.

The commercial travellers drank red wine, talked business among themselves, smoked black cigars after the meal, and retired very early to bed. They had to start on the morrow before dawn.

When the Caïd also went off to bed Taha said to Noel:

"You really havin two-three wives?"

"What *do* you mean?" said Noel. "I'm not married."

"But you tellin the Caïd you having more than one wife and him very pleased."

"An Englishman have three wives!" said Noel indignantly.

"I thinkin it very odd. But you keepin on sayin '*Oui, oui.*'"

"I didn't understand. Go and tell him I have never been married!"

"No. Then he thinkin you nothin at all. Now he thinkin you very fine man. Why you not married? You same age as me."

"Why should I be married? Are you married?"

"Of course. I havin two wives in Biskra."

"Oh! Well, I can't help that!" murmured Noel in English, feeling suddenly very small and impotent.

And he went off to bed, wondering whether it was considered in the desert sinful to be a bachelor.

Two days later towards evening Noel and Taha rode into Touggourt. They had spent four nights on the way there, the night in Chegga, the night in M'reier, and two nights in lonely desert bordjes. Noel was now deeply tanned by the sun and felt almost at home on his horse, this feeling of familiarity springing mainly from the calm that had settled down on his steed during the long desert journey. Whims and caprices had given place to a steady sobriety. There was no more starting from goats, fear before water, even if it leaped up from an artesian well, or trembling at the sight of an Arab asleep, wrapped in his burnous. Horse and rider were almost friends.

'I've received my baptism of fire,' Noel thought as he saw the red sun sinking behind the mighty sand dunes of Touggourt and the nomads' encampments circling the barbaric town that was held in the belly of the desert. He had obeyed Doctor Craven. He had gone dead south. Here, or near here, he must come to rest; he must 'settle down.' How extraordinary to settle down in such an uncivilized place, among such wild people. Could he ever feel at home in it?

"No, never," he decided as they passed the first houses set in the sand and heard coming to them through the evening stillness a babel of cries from the city.

On that first evening Noel put up at the only possible inn Touggourt boasted of in those days. It was called 'Hôtel de France' and was situated in a corner of the great market-place, not far from the mosque that dominated the city. It was small, dirty, and had no upper floor. The room he occupied was on the right of the entrance door under a low arcade. It had a brick floor, a small bed with an iron bedstead, one chair, a washstand, and a barred window giving into the market-place. There was no privacy in it. Faces were perpetually looking in on him from the arcade and closely observing his every action. Beyond them rose the long necks and disdainful faces of camels reposing, whose cries, amounting at times to yells of protest, sounded perpetually in his ears, mingled with the guttural and apparently angry voices of desert men, bargaining, buying, and selling. From dawn to dark the market was in an uproar. Only when night came did silence fall over it.

The food in the inn was atrocious. Most of it came out of tins, though in the daily menu there was sometimes a stringy chicken or some tolerable mutton. There were Arab bread, goat's cheese, plenty of dates and oranges. Vegetables were plentiful, and tiny eggs were to be had. The tea was so bad that Noel drank only sweet coffee with the 'grounds' in it.

After three days of this fare he had had more than enough of it and felt he must move his quarters. Doctor Craven had prescribed a rough life for

him, but not a merely squalid and unwholesome life. Flies poured in upon him from the market place. In spite of the desert air the heat, in those first days of November, was almost intolerable. And the everlasting noise of men and animals made him feel feverish and desperate. On two nights he had temperature.

"I must get out of this!" he said to himself.

He called Taha into council.

"I can't go on living here, Taha. You must find me a tent. I want to camp outside of the city."

"I findin you very good tent. I findin you cook. I findin you everythin."

"And you must send the horses back to Biskra."

"We not havin horses!" said Taha, dismayed.

"Yes, a horse for me. I must ride every day."

"And I ridin with you."

"But I won't hire. Get rid of the Biskra horses. They're only hired. And I shall buy here."

"I seein to that. Plenty horses round here. And I findin man to takin horses back to Biskra. You leavin it all to me."

"Find a tent that won't cost too much."

Taha looked very serious for a moment and seemed to be sunk in earnest consideration. Remembering Daphne del Mondo's description of camp life in *The Sheikh's Revenge*, Noel added:

"I don't want a huge tent with a lot of elaborate fittings."

"What that?"

"I don't want enormous divans, cushions, beautiful carpets, and elaborate hangings."

"I not knowin what you mean. I never seein tent like that."

Noel felt relieved.

"I leave it to you. Get rid of the Biskra horses at once and look out for another, a quiet one."

"And what 'bout me? You ridin alone among all these bad peoples?"

"Are they bad?"

"If they seein you goin always alone they robbin you and perhaps cuttin your throat."

He drew his hand across his brown throat and made a sharp hissing noise.

"And then you very sorry!"

"A couple of horses then. But they must not cost too much."

"I seein to that. You wantin a cook and me. Nothin else."

"I leave it all to you. But you must arrange reasonable prices. Do nothing without telling me first."

"I knowin all about tents. I campin many times with Mister Hewin."

Mr. Hewin was Taha's previous master, the sporting Englishman from whom he had learned his English.

"Then go into everything as soon as possible. I can't stay on here. The food is abominable, and the flies and the noise make me ill. I must be in a quiet place outside the town."

"I findin a place, Mister Nowill—gettin good cook and everythin. You shuttin your head, and I doin it all."

Taha spoke with such supreme confidence that Noel shut his head obediently. He was not deceived. In only two days the white horse and the brown had gone off to Biskra in charge of a trusty Arab friend of Taha;

a tent had been purchased for a fairly moderate price, a suitable site for its pitching been selected, a cook engaged for a reasonable wage—his perquisites would make up a sum satisfactory to him later on—and a few necessary utensils for cooking, washing, etc., laid in. All this was carried out by Taha. Meanwhile Noel selected and bought linen and some bright-coloured blankets and strips of carpet, for the winter nights in Touggourt were not free from cold, though the winter days could be, and often were, hot. All this done, the day came when Noel was at last able to go into camp. Taha had not allowed him yet to see where his future home was.

"You very pleased when you seein it."

Noel hoped that he would be pleased. If he were not he could easily look for another site. His taste and Taha's might not coincide. But he did not express any doubt to Taha, who was as usual full to the brim of self-confidence.

No horses having been bought as yet, they rode out to the camp on mules, and Noel's luggage, which had arrived safely, was conveyed on a third mule.

"Is it far?" asked Noel, who felt almost childishly excited.

"Not far, but quiet place."

Noel silently thanked God for that as they slowly threaded their way through the stench and the noise of the market-place.

In those days Touggourt was a wild and barbaric region, although it contained a garrison commanded by a French general and an imposing Bureau Arabe. Its situation in the heart of the sands gave to it a savage aspect, in spite of the splendid palm groves that, where there was water, reared their tufted heads above the golden sands towards the sun. A considerable population dwelt within the city, really a large and imposing village. But another population lived in native tents on the sand hills that lay to the north. Farther away, to the south, was the great stretch of enormous dunes that billowed into the distance towards Ouargla.

In comparison with Touggourt, Biskra seemed now to Noel an almost tame and civilized place, although he had not forgotten the dream into which it had plunged him on the night of his arrival in it. This was the true Sahara, sand-locked, grandiose, yet opulent where man and Nature had watered its bareness and given it thousands upon thousands of date palms and fruit trees. And human beings lived in and around it as if they were wildly free, although they were really governed.

The French knew what they were doing; knew what they wanted, and took care to get it. But they allowed a glorious semblance of liberty. So at least it seemed to Noel—after Upper Green.

Freedom! Surely here was freedom! The conviction of it thrilled through his hitherto conventional nature as he rode on his mule towards his new home in the sands beyond the brown houses of Touggourt. A strange leaping thought surged up in his mind, almost alarming him:

"Here I can do what I like!"

But what did he want to do that he had not done in the past, what entirely unaccustomed action? He didn't know. Only he knew that suddenly, in a way never experienced before, he felt that he was his own master.

When he reached the tent which was to be his home for at least five months he was startled and had to brace up. He had not expected a tent like the one in *The Sheikh's Revenge*, but he was taken aback by the size of his. It seemed to him so alarmingly small.



It was pitched some twenty minutes away from the city, just outside a large oasis called N'Goussa. The high brown wall surrounding the palm gardens rose immediately behind it, protecting it partially from wind in bad weather. Many Koubbahs with cupolas of gypse were scattered over the waste, and many dark tents of nomads were visible in the distance. The barking of their guard dogs could be heard, but they were not near enough seriously to interfere with Noel's comfort. He would get accustomed to them, as everyone must who camps in the desert.

The tent was firmly fastened down on hard earth baked by the sun. And flat ground stretched for some distance in front of it, dotted with tufts of the harsh grass on which camels feed. The outskirts of Touggourt were to be seen over the flat, and on the right, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards away, was the bordj of N'Goussa.

"Guardians always there," said Taha. "Good for us. Makin safe at night. No one robbin us. And we puttin the horses there when we buyin them. And I lookin after them. Very nice tent. What you thinkin?"

Noel was thinking how small it was and how bare, and how different from his comfortable lodgings in Upper Green on the common. What a narrow camp bed! What a tiny washstand! What a minute square of glass for his shaving! And no place at all, it seemed, for his few books. He must keep them always in their box, he supposed, and take them out when he wanted them. His clothes, too, surely must remain in their trunks, unless—perhaps presently he would contrive something with Taha's help. There was a large deal table at which he could write and, of course, eat. And there were two chairs: one a straight chair and one made of a sort of rough basketwork, which might perhaps be called, by courtesy, an arm-chair. The strips of carpet he had bought lay on the earth. There were a bottle and glass.

"For my teeth!" he thought vaguely.

Near, but not close to his tent, which was white, there was another tent striped with black and a dingy yellow.

"That the kitchen and we sleepin there," said Taha, pointing to it.

"We?"

"Amar, the cook, and me."

And just then an elderly Arab, in a snow-white djelabiah, emerged from behind the stripes, came forward to Noel, bowed deeply, and murmured in a bass voice some words of Arabic greeting.

"Him speakin only Arab language," said Taha. "Not likin French."

"*Bonjour, bonjour!*" exclaimed Noel as genially as he could.

"Now you eatin at once," said Taha.

And immediately Noel was served with his first meal at home.

He was surprised by its excellence. It began with balls of mincemeat. Then came mutton fried in honey and served with potatoes, a salad composed of onions, hard-boiled eggs, more potatoes, and garlic, and a sweet in the form of a flat yellow cake drowned in more honey. For drink there was a bottle of mineral water that was nameless but not unpleasant. There was Arab bread in abundance and, of course, Arab coffee to finish up with.

Noel was more than satisfied and made Taha warmly congratulate the cook, whose dignified appreciation was that of a Nature's gentleman.

Then Noel retired for a short siesta, letting down the flap of the tent behind him.

It was an hour past noon. The sun blazed from a cloudless sky. He

pulled off his light jacket, undid the collar of his flannel shirt, removed his shoes, and stretched himself on the camp bed.

It was hard, very hard, and the pillow must surely be stuffed with straw. So—the life ordered by Doctor Rutherford Craven was beginning. This was really the first day of it, of the life that was to be continuous for some months. The four days' ride through the desert was merely a prelude, as it were, a passing through a door to it. How was he to live it? What was he to do in it? He had no duties to perform, no social pleasures of any kind to look forward to. Empty hours, an immense procession of them, stretched before him. How should he fill them?

He put up his thin arms, beginning now to grow brown, clasped his hands, not so soft as they had been, behind his head, and gazed up at the canvas roof of his home. Outside he heard a continuous murmur of voices, his two Arab attendants in conversation. From farther off came the occasional bark of a pariah dog and a very faint sound of drumming. African sounds. Sounds such as would supply the leitmotif of his life in the desert.

He thought of his Upper Green duties. They, and his hours of study, of the student in him reaching out after knowledge and ever more knowledge, had filled up his hours happily, with the addition of mild social intercourse and moderate walking exercise. His body felt different now. He was becoming aware of that. There certainly was a change. He was more conscious now of his body, and suddenly he asked himself a question. Was he less conscious of his mind? Was his body awaking and was his mind simultaneously falling asleep?

But that wouldn't do. If it were so that wouldn't do at all. He must guard against that.

He must do some reading. Perhaps he would study the language spoken by the natives. And he might improve his French. Yes, that was a good idea. There were French officers and officials in Touggourt. Perhaps he would get to know some of them. But would they care for intercourse with an English clergyman? They were probably hard-bitten men who had perhaps fought and—done other things. There might be a French priest in the place. A Roman Catholic of course. One might perhaps get to know him. But would he take any interest in an English clergyman?

Noel began to feel that he would badly want a friend of some kind to help him through all the long months before him.

If he met the French officers he must meet them as man to man, not as English curate to man. He must get to ride really well. Then perhaps they would respect him.

Horses! He had to choose and buy, of course with Taha's help, a couple of horses. That was something to do, something to look forward to. His heart felt a little lighter. He took his hands from his head, laid his arms by his side.

And he slept, without having thought he was sleepy.

Three days later Noel was settled in. With Taha's help and advice he had found a couple of decent and not too difficult horses, bought bridles, a second-hand European saddle, discarded by a French officer going home, for himself, and an Arab saddle for Taha. He had rigged up a rough bookcase for his few books and had found in the souks two more carpets to lay on the baked earth of his floor. On the canvas wall of his tent he had fastened some hooks to hang his clothes on. So much for his interior life, the home life in the tent. But he spent practically the whole of his day out of doors.

Each day during the morning hours either he walked into what was called 'the city' to observe and study the native life in the souks, the alleys and the great market-place, or strolled on the sand hills that hemmed it in, among the big population that, like himself, dwelt in tents. In the afternoon, after the daily siesta, he rode out with Taha, sometimes in the desert, often along the innumerable alleys that threaded the palm groves, by running water, through sunlight and shadow. In those alleys the horses went quietly at a foot's pace, and Noel, gently silencing the conversation of Taha, gave himself up to the influence of the crowding trees, the mighty palms whose tufted heads aspired to the brilliant blue of the sky, and the innumerable fruit trees which formed dense thickets beneath them and showed themselves more modestly above the brushwood that crowned the protecting brown walls.

When he came back from his daily ride and swung himself out of the saddle he sat down to tea at the deal table that stood outside of his tent during the day. For as often as possible he ate out of doors. With the tea he ate biscuits and jam or butter bought in a tin. While he ate he watched the sun setting over the sands and listened to the distant cries of the nomad children playing before the dark tents and mingling sometimes with the clear notes of the rosewood flute or the dull beating of native drums.

His health was day by day improving. He coughed less and seldom had temperature. He was conscious of much greater bodily strength than he had felt in England, and his nerves felt much quieter than they had there, so much quieter that sometimes he asked himself, 'Am I letting the purely animal get the upper hand in me?' But he was following Doctor Craven's directions, and to do that had been his object in coming to Africa.

One day at the end of November, Taha said to him :

"Why we not goin see the women here, Mister Nowill? They much better here than in Biskra and many more. Very sweet, very lovely."

"I haven't come here to see women," said Noel stiffly.

"Then why you comin?"

"I was unwell in England. I've come here to live in the sun and get strong and healthy."

"Then women great help. I knowin a very sweet——"

"That's enough!" said Noel sternly.

But on the following day he called Taha to him and said in a casual voice :

"I think I will go and have a look at the dancers. We'll go to-night."

A knowing look showed in Taha's slanting eyes.

"Suttinly, Mister Nowill. I takin you and you very pleased. Women much finer than Biskra women."

"We'll be off soon after eight."

Something definite to do to-night! A feeling of eagerness came to him. He felt it for a moment as boyish and wondered at the warmth of it. And then immediately he was made uneasy by it. The calm of his body, induced by his new way of life, was leaving him. His body was waking up. And this eagerness and almost excitement were caused by this waking up.

On the table by his plate as he ate there lay a volume of Wordsworth's poems, open at the *Intimations of Immortality*, and from time to time, between mouthfuls of mutton and onions, he glanced at it. He was a great admirer of Wordsworth, as nearly all intellectual clergymen were in those days, but presently he realized that his admiration for this particular poem

was less than it had been, and he shut up the book. Wordsworth was all very well for the English Lake District, but his type of mind, his outlook on life, seemed narrow and almost parochial to Noel out here in the desert. Environment has an extraordinary effect on a man's body and mind and inclinations. Noel's imaginative vision of poet Wordsworth became pale and almost unmeaning out here. Realizing this, he also realized something else that had surely no connection with Wordsworth: that his hold on religion, his Protestant religion, had been greatly loosened since he had come out to Africa and had perforce abandoned all the ceremonies of his church. There was, of course, no Protestant place of worship within his reach. But did he miss such a place? And if there were one in Touggourt, would he be eager to go to it? He imagined himself saying, 'Dearly beloved brethren,' etc., in Touggourt, or joining his light tenor voice in the singing of 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' or 'Hark, Hark, My Soul!' in the belly of the desert.

And there seemed something grotesque in the thought. Even he felt his lips curl in a faint smile, which died as Taha's voice at the tent door said:

"It rather cold to-night, Mister Nowill. I bring in your burnous for you to put on."

And there he stood, holding up a thick burnous of camel's hair, which Noel had bought one day in the souks but had never yet worn.

Noel got up quickly.

"Oh—I don't know that I'll wear that."

He thought of his thick black overcoat, worn so often in Upper Green with his clerical clothes.

"I think I'd better wear my overcoat."

He went over to the peg where it hung.

"That not lookin nice in the dancin house. You not priest. You sportin man."

"Oh—am I?"

But still he hesitated. If he put on the black overcoat wouldn't he be asserting something, if only to himself? If he put on the burnous wouldn't he be throwing something away? Yet he had bought it. What for?

"This very nice and warm. You lookin like very fine Arab man in it."

"Oh well—perhaps I'd better."

Deftly Taha put it round him, adjusted it.

"Now you lookin fine. The women they thinkin you Caid."

"Oh—no! But it is very comfortable certainly."

"Now time we goin."

"Yes. Come on!"

And they set forth in the night, leaving Amar in charge of the camp.

Having only seen the two dancing cafés in Biskra, Noel was surprised at the barbaric importance of the café in Touggourt. And whereas in Biskra the women lived in separate narrow houses, with tiny and steep lighted staircases, in Touggourt they were all lodged within the precincts that contained the building in which they danced, around a courtyard guarded from the public view by high walls. Admirers and lovers, of course, could go in and out freely, but the women were not seen by passers-by in the Avenue de Biskra, as they were in the Rue des Ouleds of Biskra.

It was about a quarter to nine when Noel and Taha passed in at the gateway, and shrill, indeed fierce, sounds of music greeted them. In the courtyard, which was open to the starry sky, men were hanging about, some in

native clothing, others in uniforms of the African battalions stationed in Touggourt. Some were courting the women who sat in the lighted doorways of their rooms. Some were stealing into the chambers beyond. Others could be seen coming furtively out into the night, their desires assuaged. A few were gathered together in knots, watching, talking together, hesitating apparently what line to take, uncertain perhaps of desire, or doubtful about their finances. Noel saw two or three Tirailleurs Indigènes, some Spahis wrapped in their scarlet cloaks, booted and spurred, a tall Bedouin warrior with curved nose and intent birdlike eyes, a fair man, evidently French, in the uniform of the Zouaves. The women, clinking when they moved, in massive native jewellery, with towering head-dresses from which hung gold coins, looked like idols in the mingling radiance of lamplight, candlelight, moonlight.

"You likin to stay here a little and havin mint tea with a nice girl I knowin?" suggested Taha, laying a hand on his master's arm.

"No!" said Noel, shaking the hand off brusquely. "I've come here to see the dancing, not to—— I've come for the dancing."

"The dancin this way."

And he preceded Noel to the lighted doorway that gave into the café.

This was large and long, the roof supported by pillars of palm wood. It was lit by many oil lamps and decorated in crude colours with fantastic pictures of animals unknown to any zoological garden in any city of Europe. At the far end there was the usual platform on which the native musicians plied their violent trade to an incessant background, or ground bass, of furious drumming. Near them in gaudy raiment, with fringed shawls of magenta, sulphur yellow, vermilion, grass green, and purple, were gathered the women who were not at the moment dancing. Some of them wore crowns that gleamed as if they were made of gold. Chains of gold coins hung from these crowns, jingling when the women moved their heads decorated with plaits of false hair in which were stuck flowers and ostrich feathers. Their hands dyed with henna lay in their laps. Their faces were covered with paint which made them look almost inhuman, as if they were masks with living eyes set in them. They sat gazing before them like passive animals, strangely lacking any hint of vitality, any acuteness of observation, any apparent interest in the masses of men ranged in long rows who gazed at and appraised them. They were there to be stared at and considered lasciviously, to be selected, not to select. Yet they did not look exactly submissive. Most of them looked remarkable and yet dull, extraordinary, barbaric, but heavy and even sulky. The crowd of desert men and soldiers did not sit facing them, but in lines *en profile* to them, on either side of a sort of long alley leading up to the platform, and were ranged in tiers upon a species of narrow whitewashed terraces. Though the men sat *en profile* to the dancers and facing each other, all their heads were turned in the direction of the platform, except when the dancing women, who invariably danced in pairs and performed their slow steps, their gyrations, slow also, their violent stomach contortions, or fell into their almost motionless postures in the narrow alley, advancing and retreating, pausing, or leaping softly and gently, fluttering their upraised hands, thrusting out and drawing inwards their chins, in their onward progress, passed by, or were opposite to the onlookers. Then the heads turned to follow or face them, and the many dark eyes devoured them with a sort of intensely serious 'greediness.'

When Noel came in with Taha he looked quickly and nervously at the

white-robed crowd, and for a moment it seemed to him that there were no vacant places in the café.

"There's no more room," he murmured to Taha. "We'd better go out again."

And he stood still in the alley, hesitating and feeling absurdly self-conscious. The burnous he was wrapped in suddenly seemed to him a garment of travesty. He felt like someone dressed up for a masquerade, and with his European soft hat on a subject for ridicule. Why hadn't he worn his overcoat and abandoned pretence? He saw no Europeans. Even French soldiers were lacking. Perhaps it wasn't 'the thing' in Touggourt for Europeans to mingle with the natives in public places of pleasure. And yet hadn't he spied a young French soldier in the women's camp?

"Come on! Plenty places! I findin you place," said Taha, quite unconcerned.

And he pushed past his master authoritatively and moved forward.

At that moment two of the women left their seats by the musicians and, stepping into the alley, began the dance of the hands. Holding their arms covered with bracelets high above their crowned heads, advancing and withdrawing their chins with a sharp thrusting movement, and taking very small steps, they fluttered their hands with a sort of birdlike delicacy which reminded Noel of the flutter of birds' wings captured and suddenly full of a fragile terror. Very slowly, turning from side to side, facing this way and that towards the absorbed crowds of hooded and turbaned men, they moved down the alley towards Noel and Taha.

"Stop a minute. We shall get in their way," said Noel in a low urgent voice.

"No; they gettin in ours. You English gentleman," was the arrogant answer. "They gettin out of *our* way!"

He moved on, and Noel was forced to follow, for fear of 'making a scene,' the last thing a conventional Englishman can bring himself to do in a public place. In an instant they were close to the women. The clink-clink of the strings of gold coins sounded in Noel's ears. He was suddenly wrapped in a cloud of musky perfume which issued out of their bodies.

For the first time in his life he felt entangled in the atmosphere of the female animal and was strangely aware of the animal in himself. One of the women, twisting in the dance, came face to face with him as he stopped, not knowing which way to move. Taha, not heeding him, had pushed roughly forward, the conquering Eastern man careless of women's convenience. Noel looked into a pair of long upward-slanting dark eyes with painted lashes and deep shadows of kohl. They stared into his at close quarters, and he realized that they were the eyes of something very young, almost a child, yet already full of a knowledge of life that he hadn't attained to. They did not smile at him. There was in them no look of recognition of the fact that here was a foreign stranger come into the midst of the Arabs. They simply examined him with a staring gravity, as the girl thrust forward her chin till it almost touched Noel's face, withdrew it, then made a sharp brutal movement of her head from side to side, always keeping her eyes on him. The eyes fascinated him, not only because they were large and beautiful and had an upward slant that astonished him, but because of their childish look of a profound knowledge that seemed to him very old and completely alien from any knowledge possessed by him. In that moment he felt:

'This girl knows all and I know nothing.'

And he felt angry at his ignorance and as if all his student years had been wasted.

Suddenly the eyes of the dancer were withdrawn from his. She had turned and now, pushing past him indifferently, moved with her companion farther down the alley. He lost the musky scent of her but still heard, mingling with the fierce music from the platform, the dry clink of her bracelets—earned no doubt from desert men.

“What you doin? I findin a place for you.”

Taha had turned and come back to Noel, after ordering two Arabs to give place to the rich and important person from England.

“You sittin here.”

Noel obeyed and mechanically took off the soft hat that he was wearing. He felt rather dazed, and the continuous uproar from the platform confused his brain. The African pipe, as played in the desert dancing houses, has a piercing quality which seems to seek out the inmost recesses of a sensitive brain, as the surgeon’s scalpel explores the inmost parts of the human body. It can torture but it can also act like an aphrodisiac. There is a shrieking urge in it, which seems to be perpetually encouraged by the ceaseless drumming beneath it. It has one of the most fierce and fiery sounds in all music.

While an Arab boy was placing a wooden stand beside Noel and putting two cups of coffee and a tumbler of water upon it, Noel began to look round him. First he examined the women who were seated apathetically near the musicians. Their life had stamped upon them a seal of dull sensuality which made them all look alike to him, in spite of the variety of colour in their dresses and shawls. In not one of them could he discern what he thought of as the human soul, the eternal spark, piercing through the doomed envelope of the human body, that which must surely live through that which must surely die. They all looked dull and voluptuous, animal-like, yet without the mysterious naïveté which belongs to so many animals that live among human beings. Noel wondered about them, but he didn’t feel sorry for them. There was something in them that prevented that, an acceptance that seemed to have been handed down through the centuries. ‘This is what we were born for,’ the aspect of these women seemed to say.

They were not rebellious. That was obvious. They didn’t even look resigned. For there is always a faint hint of sorrow in resignation. And they were without this.

“They much better than Biskra women!” said Taha. “I likin them very much. You likin them?”

There was a keenly curious look in his eyes as he turned them on Noel.

Noel made no reply. Taha’s decidedly knowing manner and look began to irritate and disturb him. It suggested an intimacy of understanding which his natural reserve shrank from. There were times when he felt transparent with Taha. The Arab is cruelly sharp in the reading of the baser sides of the occidental character and knows a great deal without being told. Often shallow he is, often also intensely shrewd. Noel was beginning to find that out.

The two women they had encountered in the alley now moved slowly back towards the platform, always posturing, moving their necks and their chins and fluttering their henna-dyed hands. As they passed Noel and Taha the latter said softly:

“You likin the one with the green shawl. She very young. She knowin you likin her.”

This remark brought about a fierce reaction in Noel, and he was opening his lips to make an angry rejoinder, when Taha said in a quite different voice :

"There Moosoo Bernard ! Great friend of mine. I not knowin him here !"

He pointed. Noel looked towards the door and saw a rather small, but very well-made and athletic-looking man coming up the alley with a light springing step, wearing riding clothes and a soft velours hat with a large flexible brim. He had a moustache and a short pointed beard, dark brown in colour. His eyebrows were marked, but thin and smooth. His features were small and regular, but definitely masculine and, Noel thought, strongly aristocratic. His eyes were grey and were large and steady. Impossible to think that they could flinch or be lowered before any gaze of another, however hostile. There was something arbitrary in his way of moving and holding himself. He was smoking a short pipe and carried in a brown sinewy hand a riding switch.

Taha sprang to his feet.

"I askin him to sit here by you. Him great man, talkin all languages."

Before Noel could ask any question about the newcomer Taha had accosted him in the alley. They stood together for a moment. Then 'Moosoo' Bernard swept off his hat and came to Noel.

*"Bon soir, m'sieur. Votre Arabe me dit qu'il y a une place ici pour moi. Vous permettez ?"*

Feeling slightly confused, decidedly shy, and even suddenly doubtful about his French, Noel murmured an assent. Monsieur Bernard sat down in the vacant place, and Taha, pushing a couple of meekly acquiescent Arabs to right and left, crowded ruthlessly into an interstice nearly opposite.

"You are English, m'sieur ?" asked Noel's neighbour, speaking the words with a slight agreeable French accent.

"Yes, I am," said Noel, relieved. "But I speak French fairly well."

"Nevertheless, do you mind if I talk in English ?"

"Delighted."

"My name is Bernard ; Hilaire Maurice Bernard."

"Mine is Noel Herriot."

"I come from Bou Saada. Do you know it ?"

"No. Where is it ?"

"On the desert edge, but not very far from Algiers—a long day's journey. That has been one of my homes for a great many years. That and, of course, Paris. I am a painter. I paint chiefly North African subjects. They would not know me in England. The Channel is the cause of a good deal of ignorance. Or shall I say—of not knowing ? Though in London, of course, there are a few who know most things about modern painting."

"I'm afraid I don't know very much."

"Not in your line ?"

For a moment the large steady grey eyes were full of scrutiny.

"Well—no. Not specially, though of course I am fond of good painting."

"In France they buy all I care to sell."

He did not say this with conceit, but negligently, like a man merely stating a fact for the information of his hearer.

"May I ask if you are new to this region ?" he then added after a slight pause.

"Quite new. Till a short time ago I had never been out of Europe."



Bernard raised his smooth eyebrows.

"Indeed! Then this—all this"—he made a circular gesture—"must seem rather strange to you."

"It does—very. But I'm beginning gradually to get accustomed to it."

"I hope you like it?"

Noel hesitated. Did he 'like' it? He put the question to himself. His mind went to Upper Green. He thought of the common. He heard, in fancy, the chime of church bells. He saw, in fancy, staid English ladies—not mere women! Oh no!—walking discreetly to church.

"I believe I do—very much. *In a way*. Yes, I do."

Monsieur Bernard smiled faintly.

"In a way. I know; I know. That was how it was with me, twenty years ago, when I first came over from Marseille, at the mature age of twenty. A fairly raw French lad, with a taste for what I thought then was adventure. Now I make no qualification. I was from Arles in Provence. Daudet's country, Mistral's country. I was born not so far from Daudet's mill. But that will not interest you."

Noel, who knew his Wordsworth, his Goldsmith, his Charles Lamb, his classics, knew nothing of Daudet but the name, and suddenly felt very ignorant.

"What do you think of these women?" said his companion abruptly, as two more dancers advanced slowly down the alley. "Do you like them *in a way* or not at all?"

"I—I hardly know yet," said Noel.

"When I first saw them, twenty years ago, I thought them hideous. I couldn't think how any man could touch them. Now it's a different story. They represent something definite, and they represent it completely. In many of them there is a strange beauty."

"Yes?"

"Look at that girl in the fringed green shawl now, sitting under the tom-toms."

Noel obeyed and looked at the girl with the slanting eyes.

"She is a wonderful subject for a painter. Born in Europe, she would probably be still a mere child. Here she is already a woman, a deep well of strange knowledge, though what you would probably call a little ignoramus. It is written in her eyes. It comes down from a number of ancestors of her *tribu*, the tribe of the Ouled Nails. These dancers may be said to be born old, old in their instinctive understanding of the ways and necessities and desires of the desert men. Even their physical youth does not last very long. Many of them are respectable old married women at thirty. After forty they are mostly merely dried-up old crones, all the sap gone out of them."

A wooden stand was placed by him. Coffee and water were brought. He pulled at his short pipe and continued in his firm, very masculine voice:

"They respect their calling and are respected in the home of their *tribu*. Their departure from here and from their profession on camel-back is a little fête. A decorated palanquin, shrill music, and tom-toms. In the bosom of their *tribu* they are received with befitting honour. They bring with them their dowry. The golden coins jingle. The bracelets clink on their arms and their ankles. So much for the moralities and the immoralities! Impossible to make a law that covers the wide world or to pin a permanent label on virtue! Travel teaches one that."

"Yes," murmured Noel, thinking with wonder of his feeling of authority in the pulpit in Upper Green.

Hadn't he sometimes laid down the law there?

It occurred to him that this new acquaintance was being more forthcoming than himself and that really he ought to make some return for his information. 'I am a painter.' Oughtn't he to say, 'And I'm a clergyman'? Thinking this, he stole a furtive glance at his companion's firm, manly, aristocratic profile. There was a hint of sarcasm in the lips set together under the close-clipped brown moustache and above the small pointed beard. Noel felt that he would rather not announce his calling at that moment. To himself he made the excuse that a café of dancers was not the exactly right place for such an explanation. This Monsieur Bernard would be surprised. It would seem odd that a clergyman should be sitting in the midst of that crowd, wrapped, too, in an African garment. And Taha didn't know that his master was a sort of English 'marabout.' How would he receive such a completely unexpected statement? Noel felt that he oughtn't to be half ashamed of being a clergyman and that the manly thing would be at once to say what he was. But somehow he couldn't bring himself to say it. Probably Monsieur Bernard was only passing through Toungourt *en route* to some other place. They might never meet again after to-night. There was no necessity to volunteer information to a complete stranger, even if he had told one something about himself.

'Why should he be interested to know who I am?'

He decided not to say he was a clergyman. But it occurred to him that, in reply to his companion's swift frankness, he ought to make some attempt at unreserve. And he said:

"I've come out here for my health."

Monsieur Bernard removed the pipe from his mouth and scrutinized Noel's face.

"Slightly touched in the lungs?" he then asked.

"Yes. Just slightly. Nothing very serious. But I was advised to come out to some desert place for a bit and to live—well, to live rather a hard life. Chiefly out of doors. A doctor in London told me to."

"He must have been a very unusual man."

"You think—you know this country—do you think it was good advice?"

"Difficult to be sure. The Arabs have many complaints, though the real desert men, the Bedouin, are often magnificent fellows. The keef smokers—there are many; I'm not one!—cough and spit a great deal."

"My servant smokes keef," said Noel in a lowered voice.

"I know. But your doctor may be right about *your* case. I hope he is. The air of the desert is the finest in the world. That can't be denied. And I believe in the outdoor life. But what thorough man doesn't? Do you ride?"

"Yes. Every day."

"Capital!" said Monsieur Bernard with a sudden touch of real warmth.

"I've been an ardent horseman for the last twenty years, ever since I came to this country. And there's no medicine like riding. Almost any Arab can ride by nature if he gets the chance. But many of the city Arabs never get on a horse. And some of the rich ones never put a leg over the saddle unless there's a fantasia and they are bound to *fare figura*—as the Italians say. If you ride every day in the air round here and live—"

"I live in a tent !" interrupted Noel eagerly, feeling suddenly proud and masculine.

"You do !" said Monsieur Bernard, obviously surprised. "You couldn't do better. I'm lodged with an Arab friend, Ali Bey, for the moment. The inn is impossible. Poisonous food and an *asile* for rats and scorpions. Where is your tent ?"

Noel told him with as much detail as possible.

"I'll come and see you there if I may."

"Oh, please, do ! Will you stay here long ?"

"I've come here to paint. I shall stay for a while. There are wonderful types in Touggourt. The women here. And you've only got to go into the market-place for others—Arabs, Kabyles, Mozabites, Tunisians, Negroes, Senegalese even, Touaregs, rascals from Constantine, keef smokers, smokers of hashish, Bedouin, Spahis, Chasseurs d'Afrique, Tirailleurs Indigènes, Moslems, Jews. But that is catalogue enough. Only Europeans are lacking as a rule, though of course there are some French, and even one or two German traders. I know of no English except yourself."

"I believe I am the only one," said Noel, feeling travel proud. "I haven't set eyes on one since I've been in the desert. I rode here from Biskra."

"Biskra ! It has beauty. But Touggourt is far more interesting. Biskra is semi-civilized in comparison with this. There is a full flavour of wildness here still. And the population in the black tents scattered over the lemon-coloured sand hills are a joy to the painter. So you rode here from Biskra, did you ?"

His large grey eyes examined Noel critically for a moment. Then he said :

"You may be delicate, but you are evidently hardy."

Noel felt a thrill of pride go through him.

"You shoot, no doubt," continued Monsieur Bernard. "Have you been out here ?"

"No ; not—yet," answered Noel, his pride abruptly fading out of him. "Is there"—he hesitated—"is there much—game ?"

"You can get gazelle in certain places, with a little luck. That is not so easy. But there are plenty of birds : snipe, pigeon, plovers, duck. The Salt Lake is the place for them. Taha ought to know."

He leaned forward as if about to summon Taha, who was gazing steadfastly at one of the dancers with a deeply serious hungry expression, but Noel hurriedly interposed :

"I'll find out. I'll consult Taha one day when I have time."

Monsieur Bernard looked slightly surprised.

"Do you find so much to do here ?" he asked.

"Oh, well ! I hardly know how it is. I've only just come, but the days begin to go by pretty quickly. I walk and I ride, and then I've got a few books. I'm a bit of a reader."

He said the last words with an attempt at carelessness, wondering whether his companion ever opened a book. He had nothing of the student's earnest gravity, but he looked very acute and refined too. He ought to be a cultured man.

"But certainly not in *my* way !" Noel said to himself, thinking of Wordsworth.

"I know many literary men in Paris," said Monsieur Bernard. "But when I am out here I am generally hard at work."

"Do you speak Arabic?" asked Noel.

"After twenty years in Africa! I should be a fool if I did not. I've been for twelve years a Moslem."

Noel was startled and amazed by this piece of news. It had not occurred to him that perhaps Monsieur Bernard was religious. Aristocratic, masculine, acute, and observant, he did look, and very authoritative. But he didn't look religious.

Though what exactly was a religious look?

"That is the right religion for this country," said Bernard.

"But then—but do you think different countries ought to have different religions?" said Noel, the clergyman suddenly waking up in him. "If so, what would be the use of missionary enterprise?"

"I detest missionary enterprise," returned Monsieur Bernard, but without any heat. "In Kairouan, a Moslem sacred city, there are two Scotch missionaries, or mission workers. Old women, both of them. They have been there for at least fifteen years—making fools of themselves. The variety of the world needs varieties of religions. Protestantism, for instance, in, say, Benares, or Wesleyanism in Peking would be merely ridiculous. Horribly inartistic too. I am sure you agree with me?"

As he said the last words he sent an acute look of smiling doubt at Noel. Then he added:

"But probably you are a pagan and not interested in religions?"

"Oh—well!" said Noel non-committally.

"That wouldn't quarrel with Touggourt. I shouldn't blame you, Moslem though I am."

He showed two rows of level and snow-white teeth in a smile that Noel thought of as 'wicked.' A wicked smile! But somehow Noel liked it.

"What about going out into the court to have a look at the women?" he added. "There are often some fine specimens here. That is, if you've managed to cultivate a taste for the native article."

He got up and, after an instant of hesitation, Noel followed his example, feeling 'in for it.'

Taha, too, rose to his feet, but Monsieur Bernard said to Noel:

"Do you want him just now? It is a mistake to take a guide, or a servant, when one goes to the women."

"Then—we won't. Stay here, Taha. I'll call you—presently."

Taha looked from Noel to 'Moosoo' Bernard and back again. A slow smile stretched his lips.

"Then I waitin here, Mister Nowill."

He sat down again. His whole face seemed to say:

'I understandin!'

Noel felt hot all over, but his companion walked on down the alley in sovereign indifference. He wouldn't care what an Arab attendant thought of him. At that moment Noel realized for the first time that total indifference to opinion is perhaps the one thing which sets a man free in this imprisoning life. But he hadn't got this indifference and was sure he never would have it.

When they came out into the court the moonlight was stronger, and there were more admirers of the women passing to and fro or gossiping with them in the lighted entrances to their rooms. Monsieur Bernard stood still for a moment and in silence looked around him.

"There is some blue in the shadows," he said at last. "Though it may take the eyes of a painter to see it. What do you say, Monsieur Herriot?"

He pronounced Noel's name without the *h*. Noel was surprised that he remembered it.

"Oh—I hadn't noticed."

"Look now! Do you see it?"

Noel stared.

"Is there? I expect you are right."

"I must not bore you. Let us examine rather the human brood than mere shadows. Have you made the acquaintance of any of these—ladies?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Noel.

"And you have been here for some time?"

"No. Only a few days. I'm still new here!" said Noel, feeling suddenly on the defensive.

Against what? No accusation had been brought against him in words. But the inflection of a voice!

"And I've been taking care of my health—just at first in this new climate. After dark I've kept to the tent and gone early to bed."

"Very wise! We won't stay here long, then."

"Oh, to-night it's different. I'm—I'm in no hurry to-night."

"I have not been here for some time. This is a place of change. The women come and go. One sees fresh faces and bodies, misses others. I used to know——"

He broke off as a tall Arab youth, nearly black, and with eyes that sparkled in the silver light of the moon, paused close to him, smiling.

"Omar!"

"Moosoo Bernard!"

Two hands met cordially, and Monsieur Bernard spoke a few sentences in Arabic. Noel caught the word 'Halima' repeated.

"Ah!" said Monsieur Bernard, turning to Noel. "She is still here. My old friend Halima, whom I used to call the mother of the maids. These women have a sort of—what shall I say?—of Madame la Présidente, their acknowledged head. You ought to know her. We'll call her La Maréchale."

"Delighted!" murmured Noel. "Anyone you——"

He pulled up, aware that he was about to be ridiculous. The conventional courtesies of Upper Green would be grotesque here.

"I should like to," he concluded awkwardly.

"Omar will take us to her. I've forgotten which is her room. Omar"—he said some more words in Arabic and concluded in French—"mon ami—Monsieur 'Erriot."

His English was fluent, but the *h* was evidently beyond him.

Omar stretched out his hand with a seductive smile. Noel took it.

"*Bon soir!*"

"*Bon soir*, moosoo!"

"And now," said Monsieur Bernard, "for the Maréchale."

Noel was never to forget the striking impression that the Maréchale made upon him on that night of the moon. They found her enthroned in a fairly large room near the entrance to the courtyard, seated on a divan covered with bright-coloured stuffs, with several of the women gathered near her doorway, like maids of honour in attendance, and two Spahis wrapped in red cloaks taking mint tea with her and smoking cigarettes. A huge high bed was the chief feature in her room which, Noel noticed, was

spotlessly clean though devoid of all luxury. At the back of it was a wide alcove across which was drawn a thin yellow curtain. A blue vase with a tight bunch of some flowers that looked to Noel like jasmine stood by the tea glasses.

Directly Monsieur Bernard's upright figure appeared in the doorway the two Spahis rose to their feet respectfully and saluted, though Monsieur Bernard was not an officer. They seemed to know him, or at any rate to know of him. (Later Noel found out that he was a famous horseman and well known for one through a wide region of North Africa, where horsemanship could at that time give a man a title to something like fame.)

He saluted them in return, then went to Halima, and with the chivalrous courtesy of a hidalgo bent over her painted hand. Then he turned and, in Arabic, presented Noel, explaining to him in a soft whisper that Halima knew no French. Feeling that he was blushing, Noel endeavoured to imitate Monsieur Bernard's fine gesture, at the same time muttering a "*Bon soir, madame!*"

The Spahis saluted again and went away with a sound of accoutrements and a sweeping of cloaks. The natural dignity of them made Noel feel much less than they were. He found something noble in their costumes and the turbans that gave a look almost of majesty to their sun-bitten faces and demanding dark eyes. The thought of his clerical costume made his mind shrink for a moment. Luckily it was concealed in his trunk.

"Why must religion be expressed by black garments?" he asked himself.

This land was filling him with questions. A dangerous land, but it was beginning to lay a spell on him. And that night the spell was increased.

Omar left them, going after the Spahis.

"Let us sit!" murmured Monsieur Bernard. "Halima will give us tea. We must drink it."

"Yes," murmured Noel.

And they sat down.

Halima clapped her painted hands violently. A young Negress dressed in white immediately came in, bringing more mint tea and glasses in holders of filigree, with tiny handles. She poured out the tea and placed a glass before each of them upon the brass tray set on the cedarwood-and-mother-of-pearl stand that stood between them and Halima. The divan was for her. They sat on straw chairs with wooden backs, facing her. Monsieur Bernard opened a conversation in Arabic. Meanwhile Noel, trying to feel at his ease in these, to him, very peculiar circumstances, sipped his mint tea from his saucy little glass and occasionally glanced at the bed and then furtively at Madame la Maréchale.

She looked like what evidently she was, the supreme head of the brothel. She could not have been in an inferior position anywhere. He felt that, felt it strongly. In the first place she was enormously self-possessed. There was something of granite in her appearance. Her heavily painted face was unsmiling. So profound was its gravity that even a natural vivacity must surely wither before it. Noel had no idea what her age might be. There was nothing of youth in her aspect. She could not be young. Yet old was scarcely the adjective to be applied to her. She looked merely monumental, ageless and monumental. Sitting, she seemed very tall and exceedingly large, but not fat. Her dignity was immense and was added to by an irresistible suggestion of wealth. One felt at once that she must be very rich and was solidly, but not vulgarly, aware of it. She streamed with gold

coins. They cascaded about her and were mingled with quantities of native jewellery. Bracelets clung to her arms, and rings nearly smothered her fingers. Piles of false hair, reddish brown, towered above her wide forehead and served as a sort of platform for a species of crown, apparently of gold, a tuft of ostrich feathers, dyed bright red, and a veil of some spangled tissue that flowed away over her shoulders and down her back. Her upright body was covered with draperies of many colours which reached to the floor. Yet in spite of all this she looked neither vulgar nor gaudy, but extremely impressive, like a majestic idol.

And she was as indifferent to scrutiny as an idol. Now and then, as she spoke in a rather husky deep voice to Monsieur Bernard, she looked for a moment at Noel. But her look told him absolutely nothing. He knew, of course, what her life must have been, but he couldn't discern it. As soon almost might he have suspected an archbishop attired in his robes of any lightness of conduct. She was portentous, but somehow she inspired respect, even awe. She had won to the top. That was obvious. And there is something about summits that has to be revered.

More than once in their talk Monsieur Bernard, who was quite at his ease, sent a glance towards Noel, which said plainly :

'Forgive us. But I'm doing this for you. It's really worth while.'

And then Noel replied with a quick grimace that was meant to indicate complete understanding.

But after the talk had gone on for perhaps half an hour, or less, it suddenly stopped. Monsieur Bernard said something, and in reply Halima—Noel knew that must be her name—bowed the mighty pyramid of her head and clapped her hands again sharply. The small Negress in white reappeared instantly. A direction was evidently given, for she slipped away and there was a silence, but not the sort of awkward silence that sometimes falls between Europeans who no longer find anything to say to each other. There were calm and dignity in this silence, and apparently there was no thought of any necessity to break it.

Only Noel felt embarrassed by it and sat looking down between his knees at the floor. After several minutes had passed Monsieur Bernard said to him :

"I hope you don't mind waiting?"

"Not at all. Not at all," said Noel, with anxious politeness, wondering what could be going to happen now.

"I wanted to see the girl with the green shawl at close quarters. She'll be here in a moment. Halima has sent for her."

"Oh, I see."

Without looking at Halima, Monsieur Bernard added :

"Remarkable, isn't she?"

"The girl with the green shawl?"

"No. Our hostess."

"Very!" said Noel, with convinced emphasis. "Very!"

"I remember her in her prime. At about eighteen or twenty. She's had a great career—in *desert* opinion."

"Really! I—I can well believe it."

"She's greatly respected here."

"I'm sure she is!"

"Wonderful to live as one pleases, to make a fortune by it, and to be respected by all about one into the bargain, isn't it?"

There seemed to Noel to be an ironical sound in Monsieur Bernard's virile voice as he asked that question.

"It—must be, I suppose," said Noel, but with a hint of hesitation and, perhaps, of reluctance.

"That is, if one cares about being respected," added Monsieur Bernard.

"Most people do, I think," said Noel.

"Even Ouled Nails! Ridiculous, isn't it?"

Before Noel could reply to this—he never knew what his reply would have been—the girl with the slanting eyes and the green shawl came into the room, accompanied by a clinking music of ornaments. Without looking at Noel or Monsieur Bernard she went submissively up to the divan and waited there in front of Halima.

Halima leaned slightly forward and murmured something to her in Arabic. She turned round and confronted Monsieur Bernard and Noel, but her long eyes were fixed on the former, who gently took one of her small henna-dyed hands and said something to her, smiling. In reply she uttered a guttural word. To Noel it seemed a word of consent.

As he understood no Arabic he did not know why Monsieur Bernard had asked for this girl to be brought to them or what he had asked of her. Bernard was a painter. He had apparently come to Touggourt in search of subjects. It might be that he wished for this girl who undoubtedly had a strange, even a mysterious, beauty, and who was evidently very young, to 'sit' for him. On the other hand, he might have a quite different reason.

The thought of this, which amounted to a suspicion, brought to Noel a new experience. For the first time in his life a fierce thrill of physical jealousy cut its way through him. It was like an attack made on him with a sharp weapon. It caused him to realize that ever since he had entered the court of the dancers and had penetrated into their café he had been obscurely suffering. And even before he had left his tent in the beginning of moonlight with Taha he had been suffering in a new way. Something seemed to have come about in his body, and it had affected his mind and the whole of him. And since this Monsieur Bernard, this new acquaintance, had brought him into this room, with its enormous bed and the strange, tremendous figure on the divan, his discomfort—to give it no more cruel name—had come to a climax. The complete licence of all these people, of the Ouled Nails, whose lives were an exhibition of licence, and of their lovers, these Spahis, these Bedouin, these *Tirailleurs Indigènes*, these many dark men of the desert, had pricked Noel until in secret he writhed and contrasted their way of living with his. And now to add to his mental and physical pain this Monsieur Bernard was introduced into his life.

The gap between him and these African strangers, belonging not only to a different race but to a quite different class from his own, had enabled Noel to look on their lives and to think of their licence with a certain detachment. But this gap did not yawn between him and Monsieur Bernard. The unlikeness between them was great. Yet French and English, painter and clergyman, though they were, they had something in common. Too much for Noel's comfort. It was not quite easy for him to feel envy of Taha and Taha's class. Not yet at least! He did not understand them enough, them and their class. But he had some instinctive understanding of such a man as the painter. (He thought of him as obviously what the English call 'a gentleman,' and without pride he thought of himself as 'a



gentleman.' Public school and the university!) And this man found respectability, cradle of Noel since his coming into the world, a matter for ridicule, in which he, Noel, had been called on to share, and obviously lived in contented freedom outside its borders. They seemed narrow to Noel that night, and he thought of himself as having always lived in a cage and as being shut up in it now. And the coming of the girl in the green shawl and his doubt about the reason of her coming, brought him into a region of pain that was totally new to him and began to seem horrible.

For a moment he had an impulse to be drastic, to get up, take leave of the great idol on the divan, turn to Monsieur Bernard and say that he was a clergyman and would, could, have nothing to do with this sort of life, and must be off at once to his tent. He would, of course, be polite. But he would be definite. And the painter would understand that the brief acquaintance between them was at an end. Noel wouldn't say so. That would be unnecessary and rude. But Monsieur Bernard would understand and, moreover, would certainly not wish to get into any intimacy with a man whom he would no doubt think quite absurd. Noel had almost more than a suspicion that 'Madame la Maréchale' and the painter had been more than friends in the past. He felt that it had been so. And now had come this girl in the green shawl, sent for, the girl of whom Taha, abominably acute in all ugly ways, had said, "You likin the one with the green shawl—she knowin you likin her." And why was she sent for? Monsieur Bernard wouldn't mind if Noel knew that it was not as a subject for painting. It was obvious that he was enfranchised from all that Noel had always considered as morality and included Noel in a similar freedom. Otherwise he would never have led Noel to the room of this crowned and feathered being on the divan. The revelation that Noel was an English clergyman and was 'shocked' at all this would at once put an end to their brief acquaintance. Better so! And Noel made a movement to get up from his seat.

"You are not going yet, are you?" said Monsieur Bernard.

"It's getting rather late for me, and I have some distance to walk," said Noel. "And my—and my health's not too good yet."

He spoke apologetically and felt apologetic and almost ashamed.

"I think I'd better find my servant."

Monsieur Bernard seemed to consider him for a moment and then said:

"You're not going because of this girl, are you?"

He made a gesture towards the girl who was waiting beside them, mute and apparently submissive, and a smile flickered over his lips.

"I'm not staying. Another night perhaps. One can't bet on disinclination. But not to-night. I wanted *to-night* to have a painter's look at her, not a customer's."

Noel felt hot all over.

"Of course. I know. I didn't suppose—but anyhow, I'd better go now. It's been very interesting!"

He was standing. Monsieur Bernard got up, too, and seemed for an instant to hesitate. But then he held out his hand.

"I won't worry you with my company," he said. "But if you'll allow me I'll visit you in your tent."

"Do, please. I want you to."

Noel tried to sound hearty.

"Then expect me. Good night."

They touched hands. Then Noel bowed awkwardly over Madame la

Maréchale, who bowed solemnly in response. As he turned to go out he met the long eyes of the girl in the green shawl. He managed a nervous nod to her, made a false step, knocked up against the door-frame, and found himself out in the moonlight in the midst of a group of soldiers, who stared enquiringly at him, smiled, and began to talk to each other as he pushed by them.

They probably thought—— Oh, what did it matter? But he felt guilty. He wasn't yet accustomed to playing an unclerical part.

Now to find Taha and get back to the tent as quickly as possible. It had been a horrible evening because he couldn't yet shake himself free from the shell of his former life, couldn't feel, or be, natural in this sort of life, in which all these men were at home. How they would laugh at him if they knew what he felt!

There was Taha, his eyes shining with curiosity.

"You goin home already, Mister Nowill?"

"Yes. Come along!"

"And Moosoo Bernard? Him not comin yet?"

"No, he isn't coming."

Taha smiled. Noel longed to knock the smile from his lips.

During their walk back to the tent Noel only spoke two or three times, and never unless Taha addressed him. Quick to notice his master's morose temper, Taha subsided quite comfortably into speechlessness. Perhaps he understood it. Or perhaps he only believed that he understood it. At the tent door he said softly, "Good night, sir," in a meek voice, and stole off in the moonlight to wake up the cook and go thoroughly into the whole matter of Mister Nowill's night adventure. There are two subjects about which the Arab is never weary of talking—money and women. Taha and the cook talked incessantly till far into the night. Stretched on his camp bed, Noel sometimes heard faintly the murmur of their guttural voices and knew they were talking about him. What were they saying? What did they think of him? He felt certain that he must be an enigma to them. The problem of his psychology must surely be insoluble by them; the psychology of the ex-curate of Upper Green transplanted into the belly of the desert. They must be puzzled. That did not matter so very much. What was beginning to matter a great deal to Noel was his own puzzlement over the problem of his psychology. Was the strange desert life he was leading beginning to reveal him to himself, to show him up, as it were, to himself, or was it drastically changing him, or at least beginning to change him? He had never been at all a conceited man, but now he realized that in his English life he must have been well contented with himself in a simple sort of way. Now he was beginning to discover in himself many, and surely great, weaknesses. What, for instance, was happening to his 'principles'? What of his former rigid conceptions of right and wrong, of what was 'evil' and what was 'good'? He was surely letting go of what till now he had had a firm grip on. And to-night he was startled by his consciousness of this. To-night he had absolutely wished that he could be as callous in regard to what he called 'moral questions' as all the men he had knocked up against in the dancing house and the court of the women were, as the painter, Hilaire Bernard, certainly was. He had wished—he still wished—he were freed from the inhibitions that had never weighed upon them. What a much better time they must all be having than he had ever had! He almost

hated them for it, matching what must be their knowledge against his profound ignorance.

What was the painter Bernard doing now? Was he still in the court of the women? Was he still with the girl of the long eyes and the bright green shawl? How young she looked in spite of her paint, the elaboration of her dress, and her ornaments. Even she wore many gold coins. Was it possible that they had all been earned?

Noel found himself hating the painter with a sort of strong physical hatred that he had never known till now, that he had never known he was capable of. It went through him like fire. He wanted to cast it out. It was unworthy of him, and it was the begetter of torment. He began to cough. Of late his cough had troubled him less than in England, and the oppression on his chest had been lightened. He had been strongly conscious of betterment in his condition. His lassitude was passing away, slowly, perhaps, but it was diminishing. A man in his condition could not get well in a moment, even if he could ever get well. But now to-night he began to feel feverish and oppressed, and his cough returned again and again.

‘Must a have temperature!’ he thought.

And he got out of bed, found his thermometer, and took his temperature. It was over a hundred.

The night was cold. He trembled as he stood by the washstand, hurried back to his bed, and pulled the blankets up to his chin.

‘It’s my mind doing harm to my body!’ he thought. ‘I mustn’t let it. I won’t. I was getting better, much better, and now, if I don’t take care, all the good will be undone. All my life I’ve governed my body, so far as a man can. Now I’ll govern my mind. . . . And my nature!’ he added with an afterthought, suddenly self-conscious about his nature.

The painter, the girl with the green shawl! He would chase them out of his mind.

He shut his eyes to blot out the moonlight that filtered into the tent. Towards morning he fell asleep.

On the following day he refused to ride, though he felt better. His temperature had gone down to normal, and his cough was abated. But he felt he must have a ‘day off.’ He spent it in pottering about near the tent, in resting outside in his basket chair, and in trying to read. But reading seemed to him a sort of negation of life. He tried Wordsworth. But poetry wouldn’t do. He took refuge in the *Essays of Elia*. That was no better. Finally he picked up one of the very few desert books he had brought with him, *Un Été dans le Sahara*, by Fromentin. In that for a time he became absorbed. He ate his *déjeuner* with a fairly good appetite, had a siesta after it, and came out towards five o’clock to have his tea at the deal table set in the open. While he had been in the tent alone he had resolved upon something.

‘Last night,’ he said to Taha in an offhand way, ‘Monsieur Bernard and I were talking about sport. I told him I rode every day.’

‘Him very fine rider!’ said Taha with conviction.

‘Ah! He spoke about shooting. It seems there is good shooting near the Salt Marsh.’

‘Very good shootin. Many ducks. You very fine shot. Me remembrin you hittin the hat first time you firin.’

‘Yes. But that was with a revolver.’

He paused, then, coming to a resolve, went on steadily :

"A revolver is different from a gun, a sporting gun."

"Of course !" said Taha. "But gun much easier."

"I'm not accustomed to shooting with a gun," said Noel with resolution. "But I should like to go after birds."

Taha's eyes sparkled.

"I comin with you. I very good at shootin."

"But we haven't got any guns."

"You leavin that to me. I knowin many Arab men here with guns. To-morrow I bringin them."

"Do ! And look here ! Don't say anything about this to Monsieur Bernard, if you should meet him. I shan't shoot with him. I shall shoot only with you. I've—I've got to get accustomed to a gun. The revolver's different. You must—show me. You understand ?"

"I showin you ! You trustin to me. I showin you everythin."

"And if you meet Monsieur Bernard you aren't to say anything to him about the shooting."

"I not sayin anythin !"

"I prefer to go out only with you."

This was intended to fall upon Taha's ears as a compliment. Evidently it did. For he suddenly looked very earnest and said :

"That much better. You teachin me revolver and I teachin you gun."

This was hardly part of Noel's programme, but he only said : "That's the idea. But I want a few birds for our eating. We shan't need the revolver unless we go travelling again. We are quite safe here, close to the bordj."

"And all peoples knowin us now and thinkin you very fine man."

"I hope so. I hope so," said Noel. "Get us two decent guns."

He knew no more about guns than he had known about revolvers when he shot the hat dead, but he was resolved that Taha should teach him how to shoot. He could now hold his own on a horse that was not too difficult and even enjoyed riding. The time would surely come when he would find pleasure in shooting. Monsieur Bernard, if he ever paid his visit to the tent and they became closer acquaintances, must never know that he had only been a curate and a bookworm till he came out to Africa.

In the desert Noel was learning deceit. But surely such trifling deceit as this was quite innocent. A man didn't want to play a poor part before his fellows. And out here in Africa there was no one approximating to the type of studious man who in England had "suited" Noel. He had to learn, if he could, how to suit the men he was thrown with here. If Monsieur Bernard did come to the tent—he mightn't, of course—it might possibly lead to Noel's getting to know the French officers stationed in Touggourt. Monsieur Bernard was almost certain to know them, or some of them. He was evidently a thorough man's man and would mix up with anyone of the thoroughly male type.

Noel fancied he almost hated Bernard—not Bernard's fault, that !—but, nevertheless, he meant to live up to him. And then possibly he would hate him less. Or perhaps not at all. And as he said that to himself he thought of the girl in the bright green shawl. How had the night been to Bernard ? But he must put that question out of his mind. For it hurt him like the thrust of a weapon.

Immediately after tea and the conversation about shooting Taha vanished

from the camp in the direction of the city, and Noel, full of anticipation, but feeling decidedly 'strung up' and nervous, retired into his tent and again took up Fromentin's book.

The twilight died abruptly, as it does in those desert regions, and night fell over the desert. The cook brought a brazier full of red-hot charcoal and set it down near Noel, gave him a long look, and went back to his 'kitchen', without a word. What had that look meant? Noel believed that it was prompted by Arab curiosity about the events of the preceding night. Arabs are intensely curious about all the proceedings of those who employ them, especially if those proceedings have anything to do with either money or sex. Of course Taha and he had been discussing and weighing up possibilities during most of the hours of the night.

'I don't care!' said Noel to himself.

But he did care. He was much too thin-skinned for the man he aimed at becoming. He must harden himself. He must become as indifferent to casual opinion, especially opinion of those below him, as Bernard certainly was. As if it mattered what an Arab cook thought of him! But what had he thought? What was he thinking?

'I shall never know,' Noel said to himself as he laid down his book. 'What does one really *know* about anyone?'

Soon after nine he heard Taha's voice call out:

"Mister Nowill!"

He had let down the flap of the tent on account of the cold, remembering his bad night. He pulled it aside, and Taha stood before him holding a couple of shotguns.

"These very good guns—look!"

"Did you buy them?"

"Yes, I buyin them from two Arabs."

"How much were they?"

"Very cheap!"

Taha mentioned a sum that seemed high to Noel. But he didn't like to dispute it, as he had no knowledge of guns, no idea what these ought to cost.

"I'll give you the money to-morrow," he said.

"Yes. They wantin it to-morrow. Only givin their guns to please you because you very fine man. Here! You takin one!"

"Is it loaded?" said Noel.

"No. Him not loaded."

Noel took one of the guns with precaution.

"Not pointin it at me!" exclaimed Taha. "Keepin it down!"

"But what does it matter if it's not loaded?"

"You always must keepin it down."

Noel obediently pointed the muzzle of the gun towards the ground.

Remembering the revolver he had fired, he asked:

"Is it—the trigger, you know—easy to pull?"

"Yes, very easy!"

Noel pulled the trigger. There was a loud explosion, and the gun fell from his startled hand to the ground.

"You told me it wasn't loaded!" he said angrily to Taha, who had leaped aside with astounding agility.

"He told me it wasn't loaded!" he reiterated to the cook, who had thrust his head out of the kitchen tent.

"Well, how was I knowin you startin to shoot already? You always in such a hurry 'bout everythin!"

"I forbid you to speak to me like that!" said Noel.

"Well, how must I speakin?"

"Speak to me as you would speak to Monsieur Bernard!"

He turned sharply away, went into his tent, and fastened the canvas flap. He felt very angry. His hands were trembling.

As he undressed for bed he realized that the force of his anger was not entirely accounted for by what had happened, by the shock the unexpected explosion of the gun had given him, and by the abruptness of Taha's comment on his pulling of the trigger. Ever since his meeting with Bernard and his visit to the room of Halima he had been possessed by an acute irritation of the nerves. His restless night, his accesses of coughing, his rising temperature had been caused by that. Ever since then he had been 'on the edge of his nerves.' Why had he allowed Taha to lead him to the house of the dancers? He ought to keep away from such places. Although he was, by doctor's orders, spending months in the desert that was no reason why he should cast away all the prejudices that were natural to him.

But were they natural? Or had they merely been imposed upon him by his profession, by convention, by opinion, by what was 'expected' of him? If they were natural to him why should he be so disturbed and excited now? Why should he suffer in this ugly physical way, this humiliating way? Why should he feel a sort of physical hatred of Bernard whenever he thought of him? And why should he keep on thinking of him? And of the girl in the bright green shawl?

He got into bed. He thought that probably he had temperature again, but he didn't take his temperature. He was half afraid to. His health had been improving out here. He had been getting stronger. The doctor's prescription had been a good one. He believed in it. He mustn't, he simply mustn't, allow his mind, his nature—whatever it was—to interfere with the improvement of his body. The outdoor life was doing him good, the roughish life he had been advised, or ordered, to lead. He mustn't spoil everything by giving way to impulses which had never stirred him in England. In England, at public school and the university, he had sometimes been laughed at for being 'pi.' But then being 'pi' had seemed natural to him. He had been so wrapped up in desire for learning, for self-improvement, that the occasional jeers and jokes of the unregenerate had not really hurt him. He had felt himself to be radically different from them and intended to be happy in a life entirely different from theirs. And his friends, the few he had made, had all been of his way of thinking and with aims akin to his own. Out here it began to seem that a transformation was taking place in him. He was afraid of it because of the morbid pain it was bringing him. Formerly he had been well satisfied with his life. He knew that now because of the dissatisfaction, to call it by no harsher word, that now was distressing him, was even frightening him. He had a fatal feeling that he was 'in' for an experience that he had never imagined, that unless he could treat it as an enemy and, in spite of the fatal feeling, resolutely fight it off, might cause him suffering that would be ugly. There must be many kinds of suffering; there were. There was suffering which was ennobling. He had preached about such suffering. But ugly suffering! Something revolting about that!

When he woke the next morning, after a better night than he had

expected, he was immediately aware that some unusual experience was to be his in the day. What was it? He lay still for a moment.

Ah—he was going out shooting! And for the first time.

Noel was afraid that Taha might be sulky and difficult with him after the rebuke he had received on the previous night, but when he pulled back the tent flap and called for his breakfast his shout brought a smiling face and an almost obsequious greeting to him from the kitchen. Never had Taha been more obliging, more evidently anxious to please, more submissive, than on this morning. Either he was acting quite admirably, or Noel's ebullition of the previous night had roused in him a much deeper respect than he had had till now for his master. Noel was induced to believe that he was not acting but that he had the slave temperament and needed, perhaps even expected, a touch of the lash now and then and resolved in future to treat him with less intimacy, to play the ruler with him rather than the friend.

As Noel sat down to his breakfast he saw a couple of mules tethered to an iron bar fixed against the walls of the bordj.

"People here already?" he asked, to say something.

Taha informed him that the mules were for them. The Salt Marsh was a good distance away from their camp. They would have to walk after the birds. It would be a tiring expedition. They were taking provisions with them and would probably not be back until late afternoon. He had hired a boy to look after the mules.

"Where is he?" asked Noel, and was told that he was inside the bordj.

Noel grunted. It wasn't natural to him to grunt, but he thought it sounded well and would keep Taha in his place. Henceforth they would be definitely master and servant. Taha had been allowed far too much licence, and after the events of the night before last, when the intimacy of his curiosity about his master's private affairs, and perhaps even private passions, had been shown with such blatant frankness, he must be taught a lesson.

"What I do is no concern of his. And if he attempts to push in to any further intimacy with me I shall pack him off to Biskra," Noel said to himself.

In the dancing house Monsieur Bernard certainly had seemed to greet Taha as a friend. But Noel was sure that he would never allow a servant, anyone's servant, to take liberties with him. Monsieur Bernard was the type of man to win respect in this desert land. That morning, forgetting that imitation is often the suicide of a nature, Noel resolved to try to become like the painter. Something in him hated the painter, something physical, but something mental admired him. Doctor Craven had said to Noel brutally that he might be a whole curate but that he was scarcely half a man. At the time he had resented the words, perhaps feebly, but he had resented them. But he had never forgotten them. And now, pushed by this desire to become like another man, who seemed to him the antithesis of himself, he thought of that man as perhaps a type of the whole man the doctor must have been thinking of when he made his cruel remark. He scarcely knew Bernard, but he felt that already he knew a good deal about him, enough, at any rate, to appraise the immense difference there was between Bernard and himself. He had measured that difference in the dancing house and in the bedroom of the Maréchale. Not a man in the moonlit courtyard but would have instinctively understood it had he come

into contact with Bernard and Noel together ; not a woman but would have felt it immediately. Noel had felt since that night that he was outside of a great camaraderie, in which Bernard was included with probably all the men of that region. He was an exception. Being an exception makes a man, unless he has an extremely strong nature, feel solitary, 'out in the cold.' Noel felt a painful desire to escape from the cold.

If he could learn to shoot—not well, perhaps, but just decently—wouldn't that be a step on the way ?

He must be much more masculine. He was altogether too sensitive. Another adjective, perhaps applying to him, started up in his mind and gave him a shock.

"Am I too religious ?"

"The mules, they ready !"

"I'm coming !"

He got up quickly from the breakfast table. He was wearing riding kit and a Norfolk jacket. Now he went into the tent and reached for his sun helmet. After putting it on he looked at himself in the small square of glass that was pinned near the washstand. He saw a face that was no longer pale but that was becoming tanned by the African sun, a pair of eyes that looked expressive—but anxious. He must get that anxious look out of his eyes. Bernard hadn't that look. His large grey eyes looked authoritative, not introspective, not as if they were judging himself, but as if they were coolly appraising others. That was the look a man ought to have—out here. Noel tried to force it into his eyes but failed. The only result of his effort was an ugly stare that was almost ridiculous.

He came away from the glass.

Now a difficulty presented itself to Noel. How was he to reconcile his total ignorance of shooting with his determination henceforth to dominate Taha ? He had, of course, the advantage of his revolver reputation. His hitting of the hat had made a tremendous impression on Taha. A pure accident had been taken as a marvellous feat. Unfortunately such another feat was unlikely to occur again.

'But,' said Noel to himself as he rode away from his tent on his mule, accompanied by Taha and followed on foot by a jet-black boy carrying a bamboo switch and singing to himself a love song of the sands, 'perhaps, without knowing it, I have a good eye.' At Oxford he had heard that mysterious expression. So-and-so had 'a good eye.' That was why so-and-so was so damned good at ball games. One never knew a thing till one tried.

'For all I know I may be a born shot !' Noel said to himself. 'The great thing is to have confidence.'

Mephistopheles had said, 'Be self-possessed. That's the whole art of living.'

And probably it was true. Noel had frankly acknowledged to Taha that he was not at home with a gun. He had been able to do that because he had brought down the hat. The ground was cleared. Taha knew he was a novice. Possibly he would wing the first bird he aimed at as he had winged the old hat. He must have confidence. That was the great thing. Complete self-possession.

The morning was unusual in this belly of the desert. The sky was not blue but grey. A smooth muffle of clouds, pale grey and not low-lying,



shrouded the sun and made the strange landscape of date palms and sand dunes, of brown houses, black tents, and distant flats blanched with saltpetre look melancholy, almost morose. Often the sun was merciless, yet that region needed the sun. It, too, held something merciless in its aridity and its jungle-like profusion where there was water. Gold made it fierce. Grey made it dreary and sad. Upper Green in the rain could look miserable. But it never looked frightening. One could always imagine the postman in it going his rounds. There was something sulkily portentous in the belly of the desert under the grey.

"Where's the sun?" said Noel to Taha, who sat far back on his mule, almost on the crupper, kicking his long legs to and fro.

"Much better without him—seein the birds much better."

"Ah, to be sure!" said Noel, anxious to seem like a seasoned sportsman, a Tartarin *sans reproche*.

"Very lucky! No sun! You gettin nice chance, sir!"

Taha was becoming almost respectful.

"But when he sees me shooting—trying to shoot—what then?"

The Salt Marsh proved to be a salt lake, wide and melting away on all sides into marshes, or chotts, crowded in places with a dank vegetation, the leaves of which were often crusted over with saltpetre. Under the brooding grey canopy of cloud this landscape, Noel thought, looked like the face of Nature gone suddenly pale because of some tremendous shock. At a signal from Taha he pulled up his mule.

"We gettin down here."

"Now for it!" thought Noel as he let himself down from his mule.

He looked quickly round over the far-spreading melancholy land and the mortally still expanse of water. There was no sign of human life here. He was glad of that. If he made a fool of himself with his gun there would be no one to see it but Taha. Oh—and the black boy! But who cared for a black boy in tatters? For the first time, nevertheless, Noel looked at him narrowly.

He was rather tall, reed-thin, and had come all the way on bare feet. A ragged and dirty turban rested on his crinkled black hair. His features were negroid. His expression seemed to Noel brutal and curiously detached, suggesting that he was wrapped up in himself and took no interest in his surroundings, and certainly none in his companions. When Noel looked at him he did not return the look and perhaps was not even aware of it. He laid down the gun he had carried, produced some cord from beneath his rummage of rags, and set about hobbling the two mules. He did this expertly but always retained his queer air of semi-brutal indifference. Noel wondered whether he was to accompany Taha and himself on their expedition after the birds.

"Is he coming with us?" he asked, jerking his head in the direction of the boy.

"Yes. He very clever."

"Clever! What's he clever at?"

"At puttin up birds. Knowin all the best places. That why I bringin him. Now you takin your gun and we startin."

"Is he a Negro?"

"I not knowin what he is," answered Taha with lofty indifference. "He born in Temaçin, near Touggourt, and knowin the best places for birds."

"Can he shoot?"

"I dunno. He not shootin to-day. *We* shootin."

This was definite and closed the conversation. It was evident that Taha was profoundly uninterested in the black boy and his life except in regard to the birds they were hoping to shoot. Noel was learning, in his North African life, many things touching the intense curiosity and the blank indifference of men about their fellows. That day the indifference of Taha seemed almost part of the indifference of the pale desolate nature which was the setting for their enterprise. The one belonged to the other, seemed caused in some mysterious way by the other. An immense loneliness of spirit descended on Noel as he took his gun.

"Why am I here doing all this?" he asked himself.

And he felt horribly inappropriate and as if he were trying to be what he was not intended to be, were trying to force himself into a way of life for which he was wholly unfitted. Even a grotesque idea came to him that he was tacitly rejected by this African world as unsuited to it and unworthy to belong to it. Did he mean anything to these two human beings he was with, to Taha and the black boy? Yes; he meant money, some money, and probably nothing else. If he fell dead they would only think, 'Now we shan't get our money.'

"You not holdin the gun right way. You watchin me. This not revolver."

Noel was jerked out of his deplorable self-communion. Now he must try to be practical. An almost savage resolve took hold on him. He must, he would, grip on to this life since he had come so far to confront it. An obstinacy, which he had not suspected he possessed, woke in him.

"Come on!" he said. "Which way do we go?"

"The boy showin us!"

And as if the boy understood English he suddenly seemed to wake out of his enigmatic indifference and to realize that his time had come to take charge. For he came to the front, like a leader, without looking at either Noel or Taha, thrust out a thin arm, pointed with a dirty black hand towards a chott not far off, and began to walk lightly towards it.

"Not makin noise!" whispered Taha.

And they followed the boy towards the chott, Noel trying to hold his breath and gripping his gun tightly.

"Is it loaded?" he whispered.

And got the reply:

"Of course him loaded!"

As they came nearer to the chott Noel began to realize that this region, empty of men, was evidently a paradise of birds, though not of the songsters whose gay notes he used to rejoice in on Upper Green common and in Broadwater Forest when the spring came to green England. Red-crested and -tufted duck, pigeon, plover, and even snipe swarmed in the dense vegetation of the marshes, or floated in flocks on the waveless water of the Salt Lake. The difficulty was to get near enough to them for a possible shot. Noel, totally unused to any kind of sport, had not the faintest idea how far his gun could carry and was obliged to rely entirely on Taha's advice, or rather directions. And Taha, in turn, relied on the black boy, who, almost like a pointer, stole stealthily forward and, occasionally stopping dead, turned his black face towards them and carried a hand to his protruding lips in a warning gesture. Then Noel and Taha remained perfectly still, Taha with his gun at the ready and Noel imitating him as well as he could.

Although Noel felt nervous and very diffident while they stole forward or waited, holding themselves as still as possible, the sense of cold ennui, of dreary exile, which had beset him on the ride from the camp had given way to a spirit of expectation, roused by the complete novelty of what he was doing and by a new conviction that he ought to be doing it, that he was doing the right thing by North Africa.

'I'm out shooting!'

That such a feeling was really childish, considering that he hadn't yet fired a shot and that if he did he would almost certainly not bring anything down, didn't occur to him. He was in the heart of the Sahara, or rather its belly, had a gun in his hand, was alone with a couple of natives, one nearly black and the other quite black, and was out shooting. This was no ordinary situation for an English curate to be in, and the fact that he was in it proved that he was exceptional. From the pulpit to this! Quite exceptional! But was he a true sportsman? The true sportsman may be, very often is, a nature lover. But he is out to kill, and he wants to bring down something. Now Noel, though if he had to fire at a bird he wanted not to miss it, for the sake of his reputation with Taha and the black boy, did not really want to fire at all. Secretly he was becoming charmed by this marvel of happy life in the waste. The naturalist was awake in him, the watcher, not the taker, of life. It seemed to him almost sacrilegious to have come here as a disturber of such unself-conscious and complete happiness, purged of the thought that makes victims of men, fearless because remote, restless out of sheer vitality, or calmly complacent. (This last thought came to him from contemplation of the flocks of ducks floating far off on the steel-grey bosom of the Salt Lake.) To him just then these birds were a charm of life, a poem of delicious vitality, enviable in their careless activities. In his thought at that moment he put them higher than men with their ugly burdens of cynical knowledge and too often their black desires. Even the subject for a very original sermon was born in his mind, the flutter of wings versus the plodding of feet. 'We walk and they fly. Surely a happier thought of the Creator than we are!' The opening of a sermon came into his mind while the three of them crept slowly and cautiously forward, with swamp water crisping about their ankles. But what should the text be? The black boy stood still and, like a well-trained dog, 'pointed.' Taha lifted his gun and signalled to Noel to bring his gun to the shoulder. Noel obeyed reluctantly. But he obeyed. For wasn't he out shooting?

A mass of dense vegetation rose just in front of them. The black boy seemed to be watching it with intensity, completely absorbed. Suddenly he sprang forward into the white-leaved jungle heavily sprinkled with saltpetre, shouting shrilly and waving his arms. A cloud of birds rose. Mechanically Noel pulled the trigger, not aiming consciously at anything. A shot rang out, followed instantly by another from Taha. Two birds fell into the undergrowth. Shouting "Fantasia Bezzab!" the black boy darted away to find them. Taha let down his gun and opened the breech to extract the spent cartridge. Noel did the same in close imitation.

"Mister Nowill, you very good shot," said Taha. "You hittin a bird first time like you hittin the hat. You got very good eye."

The question Noel was asking himself just then was this:

'When I fired was my eye open or shut?'

But he couldn't ask this of Taha. He only said:

"Oh, well—were they duck?"

"Yes, they very fine duck for our eatin to-night. The boy, him findin them. Him very clever. Better than dog."

The magical charm of birds had given place in Noel's mind to a sudden warm pride of the sportsman. With his first shot he had brought down a fine duck. How glorious! How really remarkable! Apparently he really had 'a good eye.' He must have one. He decided to himself that he had taken aim before, or as, he fired. Yes, he had been quick enough to take aim. He remembered doing it, or believed he remembered. Shooting was a glorious sport. He quite understood why so many men loved it. Quickness of eye and hand! What qualities it brought into play! The subject for an original sermon was chased from his mind. Birds were there, not to be gazed at and whimsically thought about, but to be shot. Food for man. But only if man had the skill to make food of them.

"Very fine duck for our eatin!"

And sure enough, that night in camp there was roast duck on the table for Noel.

Noel had never before enjoyed any food as he enjoyed that succulent duck, warm in its rich brown gravy, plump and rewarding.

Was Taha certain he was eating the duck he had shot, quite certain?

Yes, quite certain. It was the duck which had dropped on the right. The black boy had affirmed that. And Taha's duck, which would be eaten in the kitchen, had dropped on the left. That was satisfactory. One likes to be sure of what one is eating.

In the course of the long day spent in walking and waiting, in creeping through tall reeds and undergrowth, in slipping and sliding over aquatic plants and becoming entangled in water weeds, more birds had been shot, but not by Noel. His bag consisted of the first bird brought down, his only bird of the day. Yet he was not disheartened. He now knew how a shotgun should be treated, knew how to load, how to bring a gun sharply up to the shoulder, knew the use of the sights and how to take aim. Knowledge of the method was his. The test must come by practice. He believed he had 'a good eye.' He knew that he could learn to enjoy going out with a gun. And he had been reasonable. After the brilliant début and the subsequent failures he had frankly put himself in the hands of Taha, had taken him as his tutor. This had made Taha swell with gratified vanity. He still believed that Noel was an absolute master of the revolver, and Noel did nothing to deceive him. That could come later, when he had mastered the gun, if it came at all. Meanwhile he meant to stick to his shooting as he had stuck to his riding. Other men shot. Why not he? There was an excuse for the fact that only one bird had fallen to his gun. The birds had been very difficult that day. Even the black boy had acknowledged that. Once disturbed, they had proved to be very shy and, however careful the stalking, had kept nearly all day out of gunshot. Taha had been lucky—or was it skilful?—in accounting for a plover, a pigeon, and one more duck, a white-eye. And at the end of the day a sudden passionate entreaty in Arabic from the black boy had induced Noel to lend him his gun for a few minutes, and the young devil had brought down a snipe, firing in a hopelessly unorthodox manner from the hip, and apparently without taking aim.

"You must never shootin like that, Mister Nowill," said Taha. "But he very clever with gun, so he do what he likin. He knowin nothin but birds and shootin. You doin other things."

This was no doubt an allusion to Noel's dealings with literature, which

seemed remarkable to Taha, who was, as Noel had discovered, serenely unable either to read or write.

"I no time for such things," had been the simple and sufficient explanation.

One couldn't do everything. But that night, as he finished his duck and sat down with a pipe, gloriously tired out, yet not exhausted, Noel made up his mind that before he left Touggourt he would, at any rate, become an average shot, if resolution and 'sticking it' could bring it about. And surely they could. His gradually strengthening body was increasing his will power. He began to feel that he could do things which formerly had seemed to him beyond his power of achievement. Always he had felt that if he set his mind to it he could probably take honours at Oxford. And he had not been surprised at his successes. Later he had felt that he was suited to be a clergyman and would be able to interest, and perhaps even to move, those who listened to his sermons. But he had never dreamed that he could ever become what the English call 'a good sportsman.' That wasn't his 'line.' He must leave that to others. Not only was it not his line; it was not his aim. He hadn't wanted to be an athlete or clever in games. He was too studious, too eager for knowledge, too wrapped up in things intellectual for that. Now, in this strange land and among these strange people, without one friend or companion at all like himself, new ambitions began to stir in him. That was exciting. Possibly he had capacities and powers that he had never suspected. What a keen thrill he had had when he knew he had brought down a duck! And how jolly it was to swing himself up into the saddle for a ride he was going to enjoy! There was a lot more pleasure to be got out of the body than he had ever realized in Upper Green. One must give the body a chance. And really, he had never done that. He had neglected his body as a man may neglect another man whom he is inclined to despise. His growing ill-health had led him at last seriously to consider his body, to realize how precious it was and how it might persecute a man. Now he began to concentrate on his body.

That night after the shooting expedition to the Salt Lake, Noel really woke up to something. He woke up to the pride of the body.

Though Noel had scarcely realized it at the time, the 'day of the duck'—his secret and ridiculous name for it—had been hard. He had stood it well. His body had not let him down. And he was rewarded by a dreamless night of nine hours' sleep. But when he waked up and had made a hearty breakfast he knew that he must have a day off. The body wanted a good rest; needed it, probably.

The muffing grey had abandoned the sky. The brown houses, the minarets, the sands, and the palm groves of Touggourt were bathed in bright sunshine and lay under a flawless blue that made Noel say to himself as he lit his first pipe of the day:

'It's worth all the journey from England just to see that.'

An almost mystical clearness revealed distant details with a frankness unknown in northern lands. And sounds travelled from afar as if eager to be heard, to be noticed, to find an echo in the beautiful waste. From the palm groves came faint, yet perfectly distinct, cries of African children playing in semi- or complete nakedness by the runlets of water that fed the jungle of trees and plants. Here and there wavering songs came over the sands, here and there the pure small voice of the African flute. The cool air, fresh as if

it had wandered curiously from a far better world than ours, with an intent to lure us away to where we were meant to be, reminded Noel of the day when he had stood in the plain of the Salt Mountain and first given a bit of his heart to North Africa. Again, and as if with newness, he was seized and exalted by the strange beauty created by light. He had nothing to look forward to that day; no event promised either excitement or interest; he expected no company; he had decided against any activity of the body, and yet he was happy, happy in just being a watcher, a taster of this miraculous clearness, of this God-given air—yes, he tasted the air like a wine as he drew it into his lungs and thought, 'This must cure me. The malady in my body can't resist this. Doctor Rutherford Craven was right. Given time, eventually I shall be cured.'

And at that moment he was willing to pay out time, any amount of time, a real largesse of time. There would be something so wonderful in having perfect health of the body. Every moment of waking life would surely be worth while in a body perfect in health. Then the mind could take care of itself. Morbidity would be drained out of it. And it would be able to greet the day with a cheer.

Nothing to do, nothing to look forward to, nobody to talk to, and yet happy! It was sufficient to rest in the open air before the tent door.

"You havin the plover I shootin for your dinner, Mister Nowill!"

The vainglorious voice of Taha.

"Splendid!"

"To-morrow we goin shootin again?"

"Yes. You can tell the black boy."

"He very pleased. He thinkin you very great man."

"Ah? He seems a good sort of boy, and very clever about birds."

Something within Noel was very pleased with the black boy's praise. After all, these simple people, these entirely unspoiled people, were often not without a certain native discernment. No book learning, of course—but native discernment, and that was worth something, even a good deal. One didn't demand, one didn't even want, book learning from everybody. There must be some people to give one a rest from the mind.

The sense of humour must have been drowsing in Noel when he said that to himself. The black boy was certainly capable, amply capable, of giving anyone's mind a good rest.

The golden day glided by. Noel did little. Now and then he strolled gently in front of the tent, as far as the bordj and back again. Often he stood still on the warm flat earth and placidly stared at the wide-stretching landscape or, turning, glanced over the high brown walls of baked earth and mud bricks, topped with brushwood, that separated him from the dense forest of date palms. He looked up at the arrogant feathery tops of the palms and at the humbler heads of the fruit trees gathered here and there beneath them, and only just showing over the walls, and thought he would like to have a garden and a little house in it and to live there, forgetting the world. And forgotten?

That mental question took his mind back to Europe, for in North Africa he had not one friend who had any care for him, any affection towards him. He would be lonely in that little house of his imagination, in that small palm garden. All the strange people here had other human beings connected with them, belonging to them, friends, lovers perhaps, connections, children, parents. It was odd to think of, to know that. Even the black

boy who knew all about birds probably had some comrade with whom he exchanged confidences, perhaps even some girl who was attracted by him. But he, Noel, had come out here, and even if he settled down—which of course he would never do—settled down in a palm garden of the Touggourt oasis, would surely never find any kindred spirit to go some steps with him along the way of his life.

Thinking this, the remembrance of Bernard, the painter, came up in his mind. Bernard had made a home; not here but in another oasis. He had lived there for many years, there and in Paris. No doubt he went to Paris in summer. But evidently he passed a great part of his life, perhaps the greater part, in North Africa. And no doubt with content. He didn't look an unhappy man. Not perhaps radiantly happy. No. But not at all unhappy. He had an alert, self-possessed look, as of a man who got a great deal out of life. Noel wondered if he were married. He knew practically nothing about him except that he was a Frenchman, a painter, and lived at Bou Saada.

The girl with the bright green shawl! Probably Bernard was not married; or if he was married perhaps his wife lived away from him a good deal, in Paris. Or possibly she didn't mind?

Noel, being a normal man, had sometimes thought about marriage. People married. Possibly some day he might want to marry and might marry. Till then his code bade him to remain chaste. And he had stuck to his code and really without very much difficulty. He had been so intellectual, so wrapped up in his studies, and later so earnest about his clerical duties, that he had not been torn by sensual desires. It was as if his brain had taken charge. His aims so far had always been intellectual. He was not a brilliant man and had never thought himself brilliant. But he was a patient and impeccably honest worker, with a natural sense of what was fine and what was negligible in literature, such literature as he knew, the English classics mainly and the famous authors of antiquity. He had got his first, not with the triumphant ease of a Raymond Asquith, but by sheer hard work, combined with and prompted by a genuine love for the mighty works of the past and a distinct facility for the mastery of Latin and Greek. He had sometimes fancied that he was, perhaps, by nature an ascetic, as he had so far lived a pure life without very much difficulty. (There are more men like him than is perhaps generally supposed.) North Africa was beginning to give him a disturbingly different view of himself. He began to understand now that he had hitherto lived what might be called a 'sheltered' life. Always he had instinctively wished and striven for the society of those who 'suited' him, narrowing down the social borders instead of pushing out boldly into the rough and tumble of a wider world. And he had found a few who suited him, being in salient respects like himself, and he had confined his social activities as much as possible to them. At Oxford he had lived in a little 'set.' Later on in Upper Green he had of course met the parishioners of the church to which he was attached and a few others in his neighbourhood. But they had all been of a very orthodox and mostly of a very conventional kind. For 'pals' he had stuck to a few Oxford friends who came from time to time to visit him or whom he visited. And in this narrow section of the world he had been pleasantly contented. A doctor's prescription was beginning to change all that. His parishioners were far away; his pals were out of reach. He was thrown back on himself. And because of that he began to know himself better, to discover possibilities

in himself that he had never suspected till now. It was rather frightening. But it was very interesting. There was, it seemed, more in him than he had thought, a good deal more. The question was whether he could altogether approve of this good deal more. But even if he could not altogether approve he knew he began to be fascinated by it; fascinated but also disturbed. His body was making itself known to him. That was what he began to feel. It was as if it began to hint, 'I am this and this. Why haven't you found it out long ago?' All these desert men among whom he was thrown, at whose lives he kept guessing when they were not, as in the dancing house and the women's quarter, blatantly apparent to him, were teaching him something; yes, were beginning to teach him that in spite of the almost grotesque difference between himself and them in certain fundamental respects they must be akin. For he began to envy them in a way he disliked and was inclined to condemn, to think of them as free, of himself as bound. And he began to know that they and their land were shaking something hitherto cherished within him. Only yesterday he had actually asked himself:

'Am I too religious?'

In this empty day he fell into self-communion as the daylight began to fail. His happy mood of the morning hours and the gorgeous golden noon and opulent afternoon began to desert him as the sun was deserting the landscape before the camp. He faced the night with uneasiness in the company of a stranger—this till now unknown self which was beginning to make itself known.

During the afternoon Taha left the camp for the city. Noel often let him have some time 'off,' as they called it in Upper Green. And that day till dinner-time, or supper-time, there was nothing special for him to do. Noel was going to have his evening meal at eight o'clock. The cook was in camp to prepare it. Taha need not be back till a few minutes before eight to lay the table. It was ten minutes to eight, and of course dark, when he appeared, coming in his white burnous like a ghost across the flat land. He came up to the tent door, where Noel was reading an ode of Horace by the light of his lamp, seated as usual in his basket chair with a brazier beside it, smiling and looking very pleased with himself, very satisfied.

That was it. He looked peculiarly satisfied. Noel wondered why.

"Well, Taha? Nearly dinner-time."

"Yes. I layin your table."

He put a hand inside his burnous, did something there for an instant, and then brought out a bottle of whisky.

"I buyin this, Mister Nowill."

"Why?" said Noel, astonished. "I never drink whisky. You know that."

"I knowin. But someone comin to-night."

"Someone! Who?"

"Moosoo Bernard. I meetin him in the market and him say him comin."

Noel felt excited.

"Him drinkin much whisky. So I buyin this and him very pleased when him comin."

"Oh! Very good! What time is he coming?"

"When him finished his dinner."



"Then get mine as soon as you can. And I'll be finished before he comes. We've got soda, haven't we?"

"Of course. Two-three bottles."

"Then be quick. Lay the table."

"Yes, sir."

As he was going off to the kitchen tent with the whisky, moved by a sudden impulse Noel said:

"How did you pass your time in the town? See any friends?"

A slow, almost sickly smile stretched Taha's thick lips.

"Yes, Mister Nowill, I seein one friend, one very nice friend."

He waited for a moment, as if perhaps expecting more questions. But Noel said nothing. Taha turned away slowly and went to the kitchen tent. Looking out into the night through the tent door, Noel watched him go. The white shape vanished into the light of the kitchen. At that moment Noel hated Taha. Again he felt a sort of physical thrust through him bringing pain with it, as he had felt when he had left Bernard in Halima's room in the women's quarter with the girl in the bright green shawl. His blood felt all heated up. This new pain was abominable. It was so peculiar, so horribly intimate, and yet not really physical. He had never known such a pain in England. He had never imagined such a pain as horrible. He was afraid of it. If it often came to him with this peculiar and deadly intimacy it would injure, might almost ruin, his life. He must forbid it to come, use his will power and refuse its entrance into him.

Taha soon came and laid the table

"The plover to-night, Mister Nowill."

"Capital!"

But he felt no appetite. The look of complete satisfaction on Taha's dark face exasperated him.

"To-morrow we goin shootin again?"

"Yes—yes!"

He sat down at the table. The plover was good. The cook knew his business. Noel forced himself to eat heartily, though he had begun without appetite.

"You takin a little whisky?"

"No, no. I never drink whisky."

"You must drinkin with Moosoo Bernard."

"Oh—well, p'raps I will. But not now."

After a pause he added:

"Perhaps he won't come after all."

"Oh, yes, him comin. Him wantin very much know you."

"Why should he?" said Noel, feeling—he did not know why—startled and on the defensive, yet somehow pleased, too.

"I dunno why. But him wantin."

Wasn't that a compliment? Yet Noel still felt, though vaguely now, on the defensive.

Taha cleared the table but left on it the red-and-white cloth with which he covered it for Noel's meals. On the cloth he placed the bottle of whisky, two tumblers, and some biscuits.

"I bringin the coffee when Moosoo Bernard him comin."

"That's right. If he comes."

"Him comin."

"Will he walk?"

"No ; comin on horse."

Taha went softly away. The strange atmosphere of almost sickly satisfaction seemed still to pervade him. Noel watched him go, frowned, and lit his evening pipe. Then he sat down on the stiff chair, leaving the basket chair empty for his guest, and waited in the still night, powdered with innumerable stars.

Just after nine o'clock he was aware of the galloping hooves of a horse approaching from the city over the flat ground that lay in front of the tent, and he got up from his chair and went out to greet his visitor. A visitor ! What a novelty ! What an excitement for him ! A little while ago and he had been feeling so lonely, almost lost in his solitude. That was when under the smooth grey of the sky he had been going out to the pale landscape in which lay the Salt Lake and the marshes.

This was an event. He braced himself up to confront it. His strange former hatred—hadn't it been ?—of the painter had died away for the moment in anticipation of his visit. And he felt pleased, as well as excited, at his coming.

A white horse galloped up and stopped abruptly in front of the tent door. Taha ran out of the kitchen and stood at its head as the taut, bearded rider swung with the effortless ease of a youth out of the saddle.

Directly he touched ground Taha led the white horse away to the bordj. "That's the way to get off a horse," thought Noel. "I'll get off like that."

Feeling suddenly shy and anxious, he went up to his guest with an outstretched hand.

"How very jolly of you to come all this way ! Good evening !"

"Good evening. An odd time for a call ! But we don't stick to the conventions out here. Except the Arab conventions."

"I'm very delighted—come in. But I'm afraid there's no luxury here. As you see, I'm roughing it. This chair, please."

"Thank you."

Bernard sat down in the basket chair by the table. His eyes went to the whisky bottle and back to Noel.

"Real desert life !" he said in his strong virile voice. "I like this."

His large grey eyes examined Noel with a steady gaze very characteristic of him, because so totally unself-conscious.

"In spite of your, as you told me, delicate health, you must be hardy."

"My doctor in London told me to live like this."

"And it's doing you good ?"

"Yes, I believe so."

He paused, considered, then resolutely :

"Undoubtedly it is. I've changed my life completely and I'm getting much stronger. I'm sometimes surprised at what I can do in this air."

"Taha told me you went shooting yesterday."

"Yes, at the Salt Lake."

"And got a lot of birds."

"I ate a very fine duck, which I shot, last night for my dinner. To-night I ate a plover."

"What one has brought down makes good eating, doesn't it ?"

"Wonderful eating."

Taha came in with the sweet thick coffee in little cups, put them down, and quickly uncorked the whisky bottle.

"Whisky, Moosoo Bernard?" he then said, without waiting for Noel to offer it.

Bernard did not answer Taha, but instead turned to Noel and said:

"It's very kind of you to be so hospitable to me. A little later, if I may."

"Do! Help yourself whenever you're ready for it. Taha! My cigarettes!"

"Yes, sir."

But Bernard stopped him.

"I'm a pipe smoker like you. May I join you?"

He drew out a pipe strongly coloured and a tobacco pouch from a deep pocket in his riding coat, which was covered by a flap.

"It's odd, but we painters nearly always smoke pipes."

"I'm fond of a pipe," said Noel hastily.

He was afraid that perhaps Bernard, once on the subject of professions, might ask him what was his, if he had one. And he dreaded having to say that he was a clergyman.

"At night it's a good companion. That's all, Taha!"

"Yes, sir."

Taha went slowly away.

"Inquisitive beings—Arabs!" said Bernard, finishing his coffee. "Do you understand them yet?"

"No. I sometimes feel they understand me, in certain ways, better than I understand them."

"We are often glass to them. But they only see a certain distance into the room. Their intelligence is often extraordinarily sharp, but it stops short unexpectedly. They do not penetrate as far as they seem to."

"You must know them very well after all these years."

"Yes, I am at home with them. I like many of them. But I have no romantic illusions about them. They are primitives; and I happen to have a taste for primitives. I have also a taste for the over-civilized, if one can truly say that such beings exist in our brutal world, and so I alternate between Bou Saada and Paris."

"How do you divide your time?" ventured Noel.

"Eight months in North Africa. four months in Europe."

"Yours must be a delightful life, I think."

"It suits me. Which division of my time would appeal most to you, I wonder? Ah, but I think you told me you hadn't travelled much till you came out to this remote region."

"No," said Noel rather uncomfortably. "I passed through Marseille, of course, in crossing to Algiers. Marseille seems a strange sort of town."

A faint smile, with just a hint of half-humorous cynicism in it, curved Bernard's lips.

"Satan often has his fingers in the pie of Marseille," he said. "But I am fond of that boisterous, that effervescent city. It boils with life. And excess of life has still a tremendous attraction for me. May I——?"

He stretched out his hand towards the whisky bottle.

"As you kindly said I might help myself!"

"Oh, do let me."

"I'll do it!"

"I'll open the soda water."

"Many thanks. You'll join me, surely? Your countrymen all like whisky, I fancy."

"Of course I'll have some, too."

And so it was that Noel, who never drank whisky, filled up his glass with a fairly stiff mixture—Bernard watching him—and settled down to a manly evening with this typically masculine guest.

Bernard's casual remark that 'excess of life' had 'still' a tremendous attraction for him caused in Noel a mental turmoil which he was at great pains to conceal from his visitor. This man sitting opposite to him in the lamplight, enclosed within the narrow space of the tent, had evidently been familiar with 'excess of life' for so long that he himself thought it rather strange that it could still attract him. 'And my limits have been Oxford and Upper Green!' thought Noel.

And once again the thrust of pain which he feared and hated, intimate and strangely abominable, went through him. It was a thrust from the spear of envy, envy of another man's multifarious experiences contrasted with his own pale ignorance, an ignorance that now seemed to him like a sort of mental anæmia.

What he must have been missing! Bernard was certainly older than he was, but what had he not been, what had he not known, what had he not done when he had reached thirty? The strange hatred, which Noel wondered at and condemned and which was at enmity with an equally strange fascination, rose in him once more. It was not to be diminished but to be intensified during the evening.

Bernard was an easy conversationalist. He had obviously great vitality, both mental and physical, seemed to be in abounding health, a state of health that makes a man feel dominant and finely secure of himself. This was contrasted with the almost morbid sensitiveness of Noel, which no doubt was emphasized by the bodily condition which had been the reason of his coming to Africa. This sensitiveness did not seem to be noticed by Bernard and perhaps was not noticed. Noel was painfully aware of it, however, and, not unnaturally, for many men believe that what they are feeling strongly must be felt or, at any rate, be realized by those with them, thought that it could not escape his visitor. But if so that visitor, a little later on in the night, when they had been smoking and drinking for perhaps nearly an hour, showed that in his character there must be a strain of cruelty, or at the least of rather callous indifference. Or else he had not noticed. Noel wondered about that afterwards and could not be sure which it was.

Noel, always conscious of a growing desire that his 'calling' should not be discovered by Bernard, made it his business to try to keep the conversation going on topics connected with Bernard or in which he was almost certainly interested. He had already noticed that Bernard, though ready to give information about himself—as instanced, for example, by his information in the dancing house about his painting career—was not searchingly curious about his new acquaintance. Although he had almost immediately stated that he was a painter, dividing his time between Bou Saada and Paris, and that though he was probably unknown in England he was extremely well known and successful in France, he had never attempted to ascertain whether Noel had any profession and, if so, what it was. He had also spoken about horsemanship and had given Noel a general impression that he was fond of sport and women. Knowing so much about him, and under the unusual influence of a little whisky, Noel first led travel and sport as an opening card and then followed it up by a reference to painting and eventually to Oriental women. He was aware that his know-

ledge of sportsmanship was limited to having recently learned to sit on a horse, to having once hit an old hat with a revolver after shutting his eyes, and to having shot one duck in a salt marsh. It couldn't, therefore, be called profound, but he tried to make the best of it without telling a torrent of lies and succeeded so well that he kept Bernard happily going on shooting and horsemanship, with many interesting and informative details drawn from a long and intimate knowledge of Arab life, for a good quarter of an hour, without committing himself seriously or crudely exposing his ignorance. Already Bernard knew that he had come on horseback from Biskra to Touggourt and that on the previous day he had been out shooting and, according to Taha's gross Oriental exaggeration, had succeeded in obtaining a marvellous bag of duck and snipe, pigeon and plover. He was, therefore, ready to believe that Noel was well up in sport and was not on the lookout for ignorance. Not looking for ignorance, he did not find it and, being by nature a talkative man with plenty to say, was not struck by the frequent silence of Noel. At last, however, after a lively description by Bernard of an Arab fantasia in the desert at Bou Saada and of a hawking expedition near Laghouat, there came an instant of silence, and Noel felt the necessity of starting another topic. But first he suggested tentatively that Bernard might like some more whisky and soda. This was agreed to as a matter of course.

"But you must join me. I see your glass is nearly empty."

Noel was about to say that he had had quite enough when a glance at Bernard's keenly observant grey eyes brought a different resolve.

"I will certainly," he said in what he hoped was a thoroughly hearty care free manner.

And again he filled his own glass. Now to play a card of another suit.

"I wish you'd tell me something about your painting," he said in an earnest manner that was not wholly insincere, for he wished to keep Bernard intent on subjects connected with his life, in order to avoid references to his own, which might possibly lead to his being obliged to acknowledge that he was a clergyman.

"Ah, you are interested in painting?" said Bernard.

"Naturally. It—it is such an important part of what I may call general culture," said Noel guardedly, but still with earnestness.

"But very often neglected," said Bernard. "In Paris, of course, all those who are in 'Le Monde'—you know what I mean?"

"Yes, yes," said Noel quickly.

"All those who are in 'Le Monde,' who wish to be considered mondain or mondaine, as the case may be, think it necessary to know at least something about painting and painters, about movements in painting, and so on. It doesn't do in any smart drawing-room, where the hostess makes any pretence of holding a salon, to confuse Courbet with Chardin, let us say, or Manet with Monet. One must know why Cézanne has become so famous, not merely for what he did, but for what he started. One must be able to see the difference between, say, a portrait by Carolus Duran and a portrait by Lenbach or Derain. To come to a later time—— But I am afraid I am boring you."

"No, indeed!" exclaimed Noel with slightly too much eagerness. "I always enjoy the talk of a man who *knows*."

He laid a heavy emphasis on the last word.

"One can learn something, and I—and I am always keen to improve my knowledge."

Bernard smiled. Noel was unable to make up his mind whether the smile was wholly genial and encouraging or perhaps slightly satirical. He took a sip at his second glass of whisky and soda. The whisky he had drunk had already gone to his unaccustomed head, but he felt, for his reputation's sake, that he ought to try to keep step with Bernard.

"We can't all be specialists," said Bernard.

"No—no, we can't!"

"But I hate the empty chatter about art by people who have absolutely no love for it. Sincerity is the great thing, but there is in the society of Paris, apart from certain small and really distinguished coteries, where those who share the same tastes meet together, as there is in most societies, I suppose, more pretence than sincerity. When I was last in Paris I met one evening a young woman—English, by the way—who had come there to study painting and was attending a life school. I heard a man who was talking painting to her mention Albrecht Dürer. 'Oh,' she said [he pronounced it *Auo*], 'I don't care for Dürer.' She was a fool, of course, and quite hopeless. But she was sincere, idiotically sincere, and I had a talk with her. She had no taste and not a shred of talent. But she had the courage of her limitations, and even that is something. If you 'don't care for Dürer' you have, of course, no understanding for art and never can have any, but as a human being you have the right to acknowledge, or if you prefer the word, to proclaim it. Isn't that so?"

"I suppose it is," assented Noel, stricken by a sense of his own insincerity and fearing lest this evidently very drastic man would soon find it out, if he had not found it out already.

"Of course we all must have our likes and dislikes. But that doesn't mean ruling out obvious greatness, such as Dürer's. I, for instance, would far rather possess a Renoir portrait, such as *Femme Accouchée*, than anything Cézanne ever did in that way. (I'm thinking now of Cézanne's *Femme Cousant*.) But that could never lead me to dismiss Cézanne as negligible in art. This is very good whisky. Where did you get it?"

"In the town. I quite see your point."

"There are endless gradations in value. But one should never dismiss a big man as a nobody because one happens to prefer another big man to him. Don't you agree with me?"

"Of course I do!" exclaimed Noel, taking another sip of whisky and soda.

He knew he was hopelessly out of his depth, but he was still, in spite of Bernard's remarks on sincerity, determined if possible not to show it.

"But that is just what that English girl in Paris did, wasn't it? Or——"

But Bernard interrupted him with a large wave of the hand.

"Those philistines do not matter, *mon cher*. She was sincere—yes. But she was nothing else. I am talking now of those who not only care for painting but have some understanding and knowledge of it. That girl was merely one of the many fools who think that to study painting in Paris confers a *cachet* on them. As if it did, or could, except in the opinion of other fools!"

"I see! I see!"

The whisky was beginning to produce in Noel a curious warmth of excitement. He began to feel eagerly amiable and an increasingly strong

wish to be appreciated by his companion. His only knowledge of painting had been obtained from visits to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square and to the Louvre in Paris. He believed he was 'fond' of painting. He had stood in awe before Turner's sunsets and the Mona Lisa of Leonardo da Vinci. But of the painters mentioned so casually by Bernard he knew very little or nothing.

"Do you paint chiefly Oriental scenes?" he added, anxious to switch off the conversation from generalizations about an art of which he was ignorant to something more personal. "As you live so much in North Africa I suppose you are particularly drawn to them."

"As to that I am no Delacroix! You know his work?"

"I have seen some of it at the Louvre," said Noel with firmness.

"Ah! I often wish I were Delacroix. I can't always care for what he did, but he was, of course, a big man, in spite of his violence."

"Perhaps he felt violence in this country," ventured Noel.

"Do *you*?" asked Bernard, suddenly leaning forward with both his strong arms on the table.

"Well——" Noel hesitated. "Well"—he thought of Tunbridge Wells—"yes, I think I do, in comparison with English life."

"There is plenty of violence out here. Every year there are murders of Ouled Nail women. Not specially here, but throughout Algeria."

"Oh!" exclaimed Noel, horrified.

"Murders for their money. Murders for jealousy! Violence—yes! But I would not do away with it. Tameness is damnation."

As Bernard said this he closed his right hand into a fist, lifted it a few inches from the table, and brought it down fairly hard.

"But violence in painting can be carried too far. The greatest paintings of the world are rarely violent."

"That's true, I'm sure."

"One may even say that really great art of any kind is rarely violent. As to painting——"

But here Noel, feeling sure that he was about to run through a list of great paintings, broke in and exclaimed with warmth:

"I should very much like to see some of *your* paintings."

"Would you? I haven't any here in a finished state. I don't carry about completed canvases when I travel. But presently, if you wish it, I may be able to show you something. You remember that dancing girl in the green shawl?"

Noel's warm feeling of geniality suddenly gave place to a wholly different feeling, and his body stiffened.

"Yes," he said.

"I am painting her in the nude."

Noel felt a rush of hot blood to his face. He had his tumbler in his hand and put it down quickly for fear he would drop it. His former strange fleeting hatred of the painter came back but with much greater force. And the thrust of pain through him was deadly. He looked away for fear that Bernard would see and wonder at the expression that he knew must be in his eyes.

"Really!" he said.

He wanted to say something more, strong and expressive. But he dared not give way to the impulse. For he knew he would say something outrageous, unpardonable, that would reveal his almost crazy feeling of physical

jealousy. He had never known he could feel animal. But he felt animal then. Governing himself with an intense effort he added :

"Have you been working to-day?"

"Yes, most of the afternoon. I came here to work. I live for work here. I haven't come all the way to Touggourt to be idle. What should I do? To you, of course, it's all new. But even—but don't you sometimes feel the days very long out here in spite of the riding and shooting?"

A curious expression had come into his eyes. Noel felt that this man was beginning definitely to wonder about him and his past.

"I almost wonder you didn't bring someone with you," he added.

"It isn't easy to find anyone for such an expedition as this at short notice. I came away unexpectedly."

"Ah!"

"The doctor's verdict. I felt that I mustn't waste time."

"I hope very much the magic here will work."

"Do you feel there is magic?"

"I used to. Don't you?"

"If so," said Noel, not able to resist a sudden outbreak of sincerity, "it may be black magic."

He knew that as he said this he frowned. He couldn't prevent himself from frowning. Bernard was probably surprised. But he didn't show it. He sat for an instant in silence, then drank some more whisky—he showed no sign of being in the least affected by what he had drunk—and said :

"I hope you weren't seriously ill before you came out here."

"I was quite ill," said Noel. "Quite ill. But I was told that if I tried rough life in the desert I might, with time, be entirely cured."

"Then that is good news," said Bernard in a voice that had a soothing sound, exasperating to Noel in his mood of excitement.

He kept thinking of the afternoon. While he had been spending it alone in front of his tent, with nothing to help the slow passing of the hours, the painter had been shut up somewhere with the girl of the green shawl, working, gazing perpetually on her nudity. The thought was intolerable. He did not know how to bear it without making some ugly demonstration. His blood was heated by the whisky he had drunk. His brain felt energetic but confused. He actually longed to insult his guest, to pay him out somehow for the illicit joy of his afternoon. How could——?

"What's the matter?" said Bernard, looking at him fixedly across the table.

"Nothing! Why should there be?"

He tried to force a different expression into his face, to banish the fiercely rebuking look from his eyes.

"How interesting your work must be."

"Yes, it is—to me."

"But I can't understand——"

He stopped.

"What is it you can't understand?"

"I thought Eastern women—that is, African women—were so very particular about men—seeing them."

"But, *mon cher*, an Ouled Nail dancing girl! Surely you know what the Ouled Nail women are by this time. You told me you came from Biskra."

"Yes."



"Then you cannot suppose that *they* mind being *seen*—as you call it—by a man."

"No, no! Of course not! Still——"

He broke off again, then:

"But that girl who wore the green shawl looked so very young, almost a child."

"What has that to do with it? She is one of the dancers. She belongs to the profession."

Something in Noel sickened. The complete impotence, the absurdity—as it must seem to such a man as Bernard—of his anger, his exasperation of jealousy, thoroughly realized by him, flooded him like a foetid tide. That he should suffer like this for such a girl, suffer in this way for the very first time in his life! He had never before felt physical jealousy. It was a horrible new experience and actually frightened him. And there was, there could be, no remedy for it. The Ouled Nails' profession defeated him absolutely. No protest, no endeavour, could achieve anything. The profession was his doom. That was how he felt just then, the whisky he had drunk no doubt aiding, though not producing, the acute exasperation of his feelings. Had he been, as usual, completely sober, he would have felt less but not have felt differently. The whisky only caused an accentuation of what would have been there without it. He was sober enough to know that and sufficiently affected by alcohol to be unnaturally desperate at the knowledge.

"She looks so very young," he managed to say, without letting his voice tremble. "Almost a child."

"She is. She may be sixteen—not more. They begin very young."

"I can't understand how——"

"Yes?"

"Coming fresh from England, it seems to me extraordinary that this sort of thing——"

"What sort of thing?" asked Bernard, apparently in sincere surprise, as Noel paused.

"The taking—the taking up at such an age of such a profession should be permitted."

"Do you mean by the French?"

"Yes."

"It is evident that you don't know very much of the French."

"I'm not sure that I wish to know very much of them in that sort of way," said Noel with a bitterness which he instantly regretted.

"But why not?" said Bernard, evidently not at all offended. "Now I am going to get you to know two or three people here. It must be bad for you to have no companionship. I shall get up a little dinner—yes, really I shall—I can think of two or three French people who are very agreeable. You will like them."

Although Bernard was quite sober the whisky he had drunk was causing him to feel very mellow. His friendliness was growing while Noel's was slightly on the wane on account of the animal jealousy which he could not help feeling. Too much whisky was turning his mood towards melancholy. A little more and his sense of what was due to a guest might be overcome. This must not be, and he resolved not to drink any more, though his tumbler was only half empty.

"I dare say I should," he forced himself to say. "How wonderful your English is, by the way!"

"When I was a child I had an English nurse, and later an English governess till I was sent to school. That accounts for any facility I have in your language. To return to our subject. I don't want you to be prejudiced against my countrymen. They regard the Ouled Nail women as an absolute necessity in this climate. And I agree with them."

As he said the last words his eyes seemed to ask a semi-humorous question of Noel, who lowered his eyes and stared at the red-and-white tablecloth. During that moment he was debating with himself whether to come out into the open and tell Bernard that he was a clergyman, with all a clergyman's prejudices, or whether to continue in the path of deceit he knew he was beginning to tread.

"And you?" Bernard's steady grey eyes seemed to be asking him. "And you?"

Noel waited a moment and then said unevenly:

"I'm new out here. I don't think I'm competent to judge such a matter."

"A few months more, or perhaps only a few weeks, and you may be," said Bernard. "May I?"

"Oh, please do! I'll help you."

Bernard's tumbler was filled up for the third time. Noel's second tumbler remained half full.

What a head for liquor the painter had! Noel was amazed at his power of resistance to the influence of alcohol. And he did not look at all like a heavy drinker. His grey eyes were clear. His complexion, a smooth evenly brown face, was untarnished. His hands, Noel noticed, were steady. His manner, more genial certainly, slightly more unbuttoned than at first, was absolutely self-possessed. There was something dominating about him. Noel felt inferior to him, less decisive, less sure of himself, less, far less, expert in life. No doubt more moral. But just then that did not seem to help things.

"The French, having conquered this country, have learned how to treat its inhabitants," said Bernard, lifting his glass and looking at Noel. "Won't you drink with me? You are falling behind and making me feel I'm too thirsty a guest."

"Oh—certainly!"

And Noel, out of politeness, forced himself to drink and, having begun, abruptly emptied his glass.

The warm physical feeling grew in him, but with it there grew the feeling of confusion in his brain, and with the warmth, strangely, a trailing sensation of deep depression and irritation. He felt that he was an outsider in this life. Bernard was in it; the French officers and soldiers were in it; even Taha was in it, with his colleague, the cook. Only he, Noel, was outside—in the cold. It was hard. It wasn't fair. He could almost have wept over it, now that he had emptied his second glass. But he certainly was not drunk. He knew what was said to him and could reply. His brain was troubled, but it worked. Only his deepest sensations seemed affected, intensified, carried a little further than usual from the firm control of the will.

"You must get to know two or three of the French out here as well as the Arabs," said Bernard. "I'll arrange it."

"Thank you very much," said Noel uncomfortably.

"As you left no card on the Commandant it was supposed you wished to be left alone."

"Should I have?"

"That's as you please. Perhaps you did wish to be left alone."

He smiled.

"You may—I hope you don't—but you may consider me an intruder."

"Not at all! Not at all!" said Noel, trying to throw a sound of enthusiasm into his voice, a look of enthusiasm into his eyes. "I was very glad, I was flattered, when Taha told me I might expect you to-night. In spite of what you said the other night I did not think you would care to come. What had I to offer to you—or to anyone?"

"Quite as much, I'm sure, as we have to offer to you," said Bernard with a definitely French courtesy.

Then he added, almost laughing, and showing the shining white teeth between his brown beard and moustache:

"To say nothing of the addition of this most excellent whisky."

Almost directly after this remark the whisky did a piece of work on Noel. The last and too-long draught he had drunk when he emptied his second glass brought on unexpectedly an access of sleepiness. His head began to feel heavy; his eyelids inclined to droop over his eyes that were, nevertheless, still excited. Conversation began to be an effort. He had to seek for words and rouse himself to listen to the words said to him. Bernard noticed this and after a few more perfunctory remarks got up and said it was getting late and that he must go.

"Could you tell your servant kindly to bring up my horse?" he said.

"Of course I will! Of course!"

Noel went to the tent door, stood there for a moment, feeling very weak on his legs, and then called out:

"Taha! Taha!"

Taha came from the kitchen tent.

"The horse, please! Monsieur Bernard's horse! You know—the white horse!"

"Yes, sir."

He made off through the night to the bordj.

The two men stood together in silence for a short time. Then Bernard said:

"I must thank you for a pleasant evening and a good talk. Very soon you must be my guest."

"Thank you. Where, please? Where?"

"Taha can show you. Or I'll send someone. Ah, here is my horse!"

In a moment he was up in the saddle. The horse reared, then brought his front feet down with a stamp on the hard earth. A touch with the spurs, a "good night!" and Bernard galloped away in the darkness.

Taha stood looking after him.

"Moosoo Bernard very fine——" he began.

But Noel stumbled backwards into the tent and let down the canvas flap that served as a door. He couldn't bear anything more that night.

Two days later Noel received an invitation from Bernard to dine on the following night in a house he had rented from his friend and former host, Ali Bey, in order that he might be quite free to work quietly in his own way and at his own time. Noel would meet three people: the Commandant of the

Touggourt region, General Vicomte de Pleunier ; his wife, a Parisienne, and a Captain Sabatier, whom Bernard described as an unusual type of soldier, highly cultivated, a great linguist and traveller, and a charming man who spoke excellent English. Madame de Pleunier was also fluent in English. Dinner at eight.

When Noel received his invitation to the dinner he was alarmed and wished he could avoid going. He felt shy of meeting French officers and a woman, a vicomtesse, from Paris. Of course he was not anxious about his behaviour. He had always mixed with decent people. He was shy because he was doubtful whether he could manage by any means to 'suit' those he was going to meet. To begin with, all of them were French and he was English, and very English. Then the two men were soldiers serving in Africa, and he was a clergyman. Thirdly, the lady he was to meet was Parisian and he was Upper Green. If only he could avoid this ordeal ! But how could he ? He had no engagement for any evening, and of course Bernard knew it. He must accept and he must go. He did accept, sending a polite note of thanks by Taha. And then came the question of what to wear.

He had brought with him to Africa no formal evening clothes such as a non-clergyman wears in England, but only a black clerical costume to be worn with a high black silk waistcoat and jam-pot collar. This was what he had always worn at evening festivities in his own country. He could not wear it at the dinner. If he did he would give away the fact that he was a cleric. He was determined to keep that secret. More and more tightly, as the days went on, did he cling to his incognito. It was cowardly, perhaps, unworthy of his calling. But he felt that African life in Touggourt would become impossible if anyone knew that he was a Protestant priest. A Protestant priest who had been to the dancing café ! A Protestant priest who had visited the Maréchale of the Ouled Naïls, who had sat in her room with the huge bed late at night, who had been visited there by the girl in the green shawl ! True that only Bernard had been with him. But it wouldn't do. All this time he had in a way sailed under false colours. He couldn't now appear suddenly as a crow in the desert, in his sable attire, in his white choker. If he did so everyone would be astonished. A coldness would fall on the French assembly of soldiers, the Parisian vicomtesse, the Bohemian painter. And Bernard would certainly feel that he had been deceived, tricked almost. And Noel would have to watch his conduct perpetually while in Touggourt. He would have always to 'behave like a clergyman.'

Something in him, something new, something restive, something that was becoming importunate, didn't wish to do that. So the clerical attire was ruled out. There remained in his modest wardrobe only one other dark suit. It was blue, but at night looked almost black. He must wear that. He had brought it to Africa as part of his mufti.

On the appointed night he put it on with a turned-down white collar and black tie. He hoped that would do. He would explain in a discreet aside to Bernard that as he hadn't supposed he would go into any society in Africa he hadn't troubled to bring evening dress. The officers would probably come in uniform. But what would Bernard wear ? He spent part of each year in Paris and was a thorough man of the world, not one of your café-haunting Bohemians. And a lady would be present, a vicomtesse.

There were in those days a few sand carts in Touggourt drawn by mules. Noel hired one to take him to town, so that his black shoes should not be soiled. He started in good time after a long look into his small square of glass. In the blue suit, with an ordinary collar, did he suggest a clergyman? Was there anything ecclesiastical in his appearance? He hoped and believed not. His face was browned by the sun and the strong desert air. His eyes, he thought, had a straight masculine look. His lips were surely firm. It seemed to him that even his appearance was beginning to change, as something behind that appearance seemed beginning to change too. The constant horse exercise had braced up his figure, which no longer looked sedentary. Could anyone tell that he was, or rather had been—that was it: had been!—consumptive? Surely not. Except perhaps a highly acute and observant doctor. And no doctors would be at the dinner.

Bernard, apparently forgetting Taha, had sent an Arab boy to show the way to his house. The mule which drew the cart proceeded at a leisurely pace over the desert, not urged on by the driver, a languid Arab who seemed sunk in a keef dream. Noel arrived a little late at a white house with a flat roof, which stood in a side alley not far from the dancing house. He knocked on a door painted green and was admitted by a handsome young Arab in spotless white garments with a broad scarlet belt round his narrow waist and a snow-white turban bound with perfect skill about his small proud head.

He greeted Noel with a dazzling smile and said in a gentle voice:

*"Bonsoir, moosoo. Entrez."*

Then he ushered Noel into an arcade, which was built round an open courtyard with a small fountain in the centre.

As Noel walked into this arcade, which was lit faintly by small hanging lamps of brasswork and painted glass, he heard a sound of voices and laughter. The other guests, it seemed, had already arrived. A fragrant scent of incense came out to meet him as, convoyed by the smiling youth, walking softly in scarlet babouches, he went towards a doorway a little way down the arcade, feeling very nervous and deceitful.

The first thing he knew, as the painter came forward to greet him, was that he was the last to arrive, that the two officers were in uniform, and that his host wore a dinner jacket with evening trousers and a black bow tie. The next thing he knew was that Bernard was saying in a very distinct voice:

"I'm so glad you did as I asked you to and didn't put on evening clothes, as you were coming across the desert."

The third thing he knew was that a rather tall and very slim woman, with reddish-brown hair and eyes, wearing an olive-green evening gown, was looking at him with a rather sharp curiosity, which vanished directly she met his anxiously wandering gaze. This woman looked, he thought, about forty and much smarter than any woman he had come across in his few social excursions. (Although he was thirty he had really gone out very little and only in upper-middle-class country society.)

"Come and meet my desert friends," added Bernard.

And he introduced Noel to the Commandant and his wife, and to Captain Sabatier.

The Commandant was tall and thin, sun-dried and wrinkled, with small very keen eyes, grey hair brushed back with no parting, and a grey moustache turned, but slightly, up at the ends. There was a marked wave in his hair which gave to his appearance an ornamental, almost artificial, look.

He looked, too, as hard as nails, but not disagreeable, yet not specially amiable either. His wife greeted Noel with a sociable smile that was well meant. It vanished, however, with rather startling abruptness, leaving her face grave and apparently somewhat dreamily indifferent. This, combined with the sharply curious look which had been noticed by Noel on his entrance, produced on him the impression that she was a complicated person who would, with difficulty, be understood by him, but who might possibly understand a good deal of him without taking much trouble.

The third person of the little group of people strange to Noel, Captain Sabatier, was the most remarkable-looking. Or so Noel thought. He was short and slight but had broad shoulders and probably a very muscular frame. His hair and moustache were jet black. But his large eyes were of a piercing blue and had in them an arresting expression, as of one who was accustomed to looking steadfastly into far distances. There was something melancholy and imaginative in his face. He did not look definitely 'soldierly' as the Commandant certainly did. Noel was attracted by him. He was so individual. He did not belong to any type that Noel was acquainted with. English people, seeing him for the first time, would surely have labelled him 'queer.' Anyhow, Noel felt that the Sabatier queerness would be worth studying, worth exploring, if one were allowed to explore it. Sabatier instantly interested him. But he did not suppose that he would ever interest Sabatier.

Madame de Pleunier was fluent in English. Sabatier also spoke English quite well. The Commandant knew some English but not very much. He explained politely to Noel that he could read an English newspaper, "*mais quant à parler je n'ai l'habitude. Votre belle langue est très difficile, cher monsieur.*" To this Noel, still nervous and afraid of not 'suiting' the company, managed to reply, "*Et aussi votre belle langue pour moi, mon Commandant! Mais je la parle tant bien que mal.*"

"We will manage," said Bernard cheerily. "A little French, a good deal of English."

He turned to Noel.

"To be *en règle* I ought to put you on my left, as you are the foreigner among us. But if you allow me I will put you between Madame de Pleunier and the Captain, who both talk good English, and keep the Commandant for myself. *Mon Commandant*, please sit on my left."

They went into a small dining-room, simply furnished, rather bare, with tiled and white walls, an Oriental carpet from Kairouan on the floor, a central hanging lamp, chairs to sit on, a narrow divan on one side. The tall Arab youth served them unassisted. The dinner was excellent, though not original in North Africa.

There was, of course, couscous, but of the best kind, the wheat meal being strewn with capscums, apricots, dates, smothered in a delicious broth and served with a fat chicken laid on the top of the savoury mound. There were little balls of succulent mincemeat with a cream sauce and potatoes. And there was as the *pièce de résistance*, the regulation sheep roasted whole and stretched out at full length on a huge bronze dish. This should have been eaten with the fingers, but Bernard, with a smiling apology for his defiance of the African rule, carved it deftly with knife and fork and distributed the best bits to his guests. A sweet followed containing almonds, dates, and honey made into a species of *pâté* and clothed in feathery-light pastry. French wines, both red and white, were offered, and in the middle

of the meal a first-rate dry champagne was uncorked. Camembert cheese, in perfect condition, with slightly salted biscuits, and a dessert of oranges, dates, and apricots brought the dinner to a close. There were pink and purple flowers of a species unfamiliar to Noel on the table, the purple blossoms being specially brilliant and reminding him of English stocks.

Conversation was rapid, ceaseless, and easy, except in the case of Noel. This was his first experience of the conversational facility of well-bred French people, thoroughly accustomed to society and totally free from the malignant curse of shyness. How he envied their ability, their lack of the self-consciousness that was his and that he strove to conceal. There seemed to be no awkward fishing about for subjects of talk. Subjects just presented themselves in ceaseless succession. One felt that these people could talk all night without being gruelled for matter. And they talked lightly. Heaviness seemed unknown to them. He felt that they could not be ponderous even if they tried.

At the beginning of dinner Madame de Pleunier, immediately throwing off the vagueness Noel had noticed in her, set out to make him at home and at ease. She said that they had all been surprised to know that an Englishman was camping out for the winter so near to them and wondered what had brought him to such an uncivilized place.

"We all have our reason for being here: duty," she said. "And wondered about you, till Bernard"—she spoke of him familiarly as 'Bernard' without any prefix—"told us you were here for your health. I hope this dry climate is doing you good?"

She asked this as if she really wished to be informed. Noel assured her earnestly that he was feeling much stronger than when he had arrived.

"Were you recommended to come here?" Sabatier asked him in a quiet, rather deep voice.

Noel told them of Doctor Craven's prescription.

"What an original idea!" said Madame de Pleunier. "But how audacious of you to obey it! Were you already a traveller?"

Noel explained that he had very seldom been out of England and never before out of Europe. On this they both looked at him with evidently increased interest, and Sabatier said:

"You were a bold man to undertake such an adventure. Many men, untraveller, would have thought your doctor's advice was crazy."

"I did," said Noel.

"But you have taken it!"

"Yes."

And encouraged by their apparent kind interest, or clever simulation of interest, he cast off some of his shyness and told them of his hesitation, his visit to another doctor, the steadying of his conviction that Doctor Craven was more sincere and gifted than the average doctor, and his decision to do the wild thing.

"You were wise," said Sabatier with the strange deep seriousness that Noel was beginning to notice and that, nevertheless, had a certain French lightness which saved it from being dull. "There is healing in the Sahara, healing for body and also for mind."

"For mind, too, you think?" questioned Noel with sudden eagerness.

"Monsieur Herriot," interposed Madame de Pleunier, "you are talking with a fanatical devotee of the Sahara, who surpasses even our friend Bernard in his devotion."

"What is that?" asked Bernard, who had been talking in French to the Commandant. "I heard my name coupled with devotion."

"Not to a mistress!" said Madame de Pleunier. "Only to the Sahara."

Then there was some general conversation about the great desert, in which the Commandant only took an occasional part, speaking in French when appealed to by one or another. Noel listened to it with fascinated interest. For these people knew it as he did not.

He gathered quickly that Madame de Pleunier did not share entirely the three men's opinion of the Sahara. She had already implied that 'they,' meaning evidently the French officers stationed in Touggourt and their 'belongings,' if any, were there as a matter of duty. They *had* to be there. Her husband was Commandant, and she was perhaps a devoted wife, though somehow she did not look specially devoted. Or possibly her husband considered it advisable for him in his position to have his wife with him to play hostess when he was now and then entertaining officially. So there she was and making, doubtless, the best of it. But she did not pretend to have any great love for the Sahara as a natural phenomenon. Indeed, when they were talking about it, and all the men, in their differing ways, were indicating that it meant a great deal to them, a slightly satirical and even a slightly patronizing expression showed in her face, such as an elder's face sometimes shows when a child is being exuberantly naïve. And finally she said:

"It's wonderful, of course, one of the most wonderful exhibitions of nature spread out for our astonishment. But there's something sinister in its vastness. It's a marvellous monster, and I, for one, can never draw quite close to it. It holds me a little off. It never takes me quite to itself—as it evidently does you, Sabatier."

"And your husband too," said Bernard, speaking in French. "Isn't it so, *mon Commandant*?"

The general answered in French:

"I'm a seasoned soldier of the Sahara. So much of my service has been passed in it, I have lived in it so long, that I feel I belong to it. When my end comes I ought to have a grave in the sands. Better than Père la Chaise, far better."

He spoke in a level voice without any emotion, but Noel felt a great sincerity in it.

"But this Touggourt," he added, "is almost civilization compared with places I have lived in. You couldn't have endured *them*, Adèle."

"It's quite sufficiently uncivilized for me here, Raoul," she answered, smiling. "But Sabatier, I know, feels as you do. You long to be much farther south, don't you, Jacques? Ouargla, El Oued, Tombouctou. You look upon Touggourt as a mere suburb of the Sahara. Isn't it so?"

"Not quite that. Biskra, yes, with its railway. But Ghardaia would please me better than this, I confess."

"Or the Touareg country," she persisted. "The Hoggar, the land of the men with veils."

"Ah, Djebel Hoggar!" he said, the far-away look deepening in his vivid blue eyes. "Waregla, N'Goussa! Do you mean to travel on, monsieur?"

"Oh, no!" said Noel, who had begun to feel like a mere tourist among these hard-bitten men of the wastes. "This—here, I mean—seems wonderful to me. I am new to it all. Even Biskra made a great impression on me, in spite of the railway."



"Thank God we are well away from it here!" said Sabatier with fervour. "When I was stationed in Biskra the shriek of the railway whistle came to me like a blasphemy."

"I like life seasoned with blasphemy," said Madame de Pleunier. "They all think me a philistine, Monsieur Herriot. And the people of the desert—I call them savages—what do you think of them?"

"I hardly know yet. You see, I can't speak their language."

"Have you seen the Ouled Nail women here?"

Bernard fixed his eyes upon Noel.

"Yes, once."

"Aren't they awful?"

"Well——" He hesitated, looking across the table at Bernard, who lifted his eyebrows and gave a very slight reassuring movement of his head, as if to say, "It's all right. Let her go."

"Well, you see, I hardly——"

Again he hesitated.

"Can you imagine how any man can be attracted by such monsters, with their piles of dusty false hair, their dreadfully overpainted faces and mouths, their eyes surrounded with kohl, their henna-stained hands? And their blousy, overblown bodices! No line! No delicacy of form. Nothing svelte! Nothing sinuous! Their dance of the hands has a certain charm till one gets tired of it. But the *danse du ventre*—*c'est une horreur!* And yet out here they make fortunes. So much for the taste of the desert men!"

While she spoke her curious red-brown eyes, hard now and searching, went from one to the other of the four men at the table, and even Noel, in spite of his lack of social knowledge and very poor understanding of feminine subtleties, realized an undercurrent of feeling in the room that must remain unexpressed by these men, though this one woman, notwithstanding her lightly satirical tone and half-laughing contempt in the final sentence, was giving surely something more than a hint of it.

"They are not as we are," said Bernard carelessly. "The desert has moulded them, though they were not born in it."

The Commandant sat in silence, looking straight before him, a cigarette between his firm lips. But Captain Sabatier, like one answering a challenge, but always keeping a certain quiet in his deep voice, said:

"In extreme youth I have sometimes found great enigmatic beauty in these women. They fade, of course, rapidly."

"No wonder! Considering the life they lead!" said Madame de Pleunier piercingly.

He made no comment on that but continued, Noel thought, with a certain intentional obstinacy, almost as of one defending a cause:

"There is a girl here just now, the youngest of the bunch, who, if she appeared in Paris, dressed by one of our geniuses, coiffée by another, would set the boulevards aflame."

"Which is that?" asked Madame de Pleunier in a voice with an edge to it.

"When she dances she wears a bright green shawl."

Noel felt the blood surge to his face. Madame Pleunier's sharp eyes went to him.

"I've never seen her," she said incredulously. "Does she bulge like the rest of them?"

"She has kept her line," said Bernard.

"You know her then?"

"I am painting her."

The Commandant's small bright eyes suddenly looked intent, and a momentary hint that was almost of youth recalled flickered over his sun-dried and wrinkled face with its leathery texture.

"In the green shawl?" asked Sabatier.

"No," said Bernard. "If you have finished your wine——" He glanced round the table. "No more? Then let us go into the salon and have coffee."

When the party broke up about half an hour after eleven Madame de Pleunier quite cordially, though with her rather artificial smile, asked Noel to call at the Commandant's quarters near the Bureau Arabe, and of course he promised to do so. Her husband bade him good-bye with a soldier-like grip of a dry sinewy hand and said:

*"Au revoir, monsieur. Venez nous voir."*

*"Mais oui, mon Commandant, avec plaisir. Merci."*

Then Sabatier and Noel took leave of their host, who did not try to detain them.

"I've pulled you out of your retreat," Bernard said to Noel in farewell. "I hope you forgive me."

"I've enjoyed it," said Noel.

And he meant it. In spite of his shyness he felt that he had enjoyed it. His feeling of loneliness was abated. He felt less of an outsider. These French people, so different from himself, seemed to mean well towards him. He responded. But he felt doubtful about Madame de Pleunier. He knew that he had little real understanding of her and that there was probably in her a great deal to understand. Was she hard? He fancied so. Yet he guessed that she might be capable of very strong feeling. Did she resent living in Touggourt? Probably. How was she with her husband? Were they a united couple? Or was there a big gap of some kind between them? He could not read the Commandant. He saw him as a soldier, typically soldier. A sort of iron bravery in him. As a man closed up. Polite, a thorough gentleman, an aristocrat even, but impenetrably reserved at a first meeting and perhaps after many meetings. Noel had never met that type of man before. The desert had surely marked him, had put an impress upon more than his body. Noel felt a sort of awe of him, but also a creeping of irresistible admiration for him.

"He's worth more than I am, much more."

His had surely been a grand life. At any rate, in comparison with a clergyman's life in England. As Noel's body gradually grew stronger something in him was stretching out after the physical prowess which takes its rise perhaps from two elements, one physical, the other a prowess connected with the state of the body, influenced probably by the condition of the body, but different and with its own bright independence.

"The mind's all very well, but it's grand to do big things with the body!"

He felt almost a schoolboy admiration and respect that night for the lined and lean Commandant of Touggourt.

When Sabatier and he came out together the sand cart was waiting in the sandy lane.

"You are driving?" said Sabatier, apparently rather surprised.

"I live some way out. I'm camping. Living in a tent."

"That's good."

He held out his hand. His vivid blue eyes looked at Noel and beyond him.

"Then good night."

"But are you walking?"

"Yes, of course."

"Which way?"

"I live at the other side of the Grande Place."

"Then may I walk with you? The sand cart can follow us."

"Please do. Shall I tell him? I fancy you don't yet talk the lingo."

"No. I wish you kindly would."

Sabatier said some words in Arabic to the languid muleteer. Then they walked on together towards the Avenue de Biskra.

They heard music coming from the women's quarter, the pipe and the tambour.

"Have you managed to get to like that music yet?" asked Sabatier.

Noel hesitated for a moment, listening in the darkness.

"I'm not sure."

He paused and then added:

"I believe I have."

"It acts like an aphrodisiac."

"Does it?"

"It is feverish and puts fever into men. Madame de Pleunier detests that music."

"Is she here much?"

"Yes, quite a good deal. Last year she spent at least six months here. And now she has been out since October. She has a lot of will power."

"Has she any children?"

"No. She doesn't like children."

"How extraordinary!" said Noel with *naïveté*.

"She thinks they spoil the figure. And as you must have noticed at dinner she is very concerned about a woman's line."

"She has kept hers," ventured Noel.

"Yes. She's a clever woman."

"I thought she looked clever."

"The Commandant is a very fine man, one of the best African soldiers we have. The natives think he has a charmed life. He has escaped so many dangers. He knows the Sahara better than most men. Once when he was ruling in an outlying district it came to his knowledge that the chiefs of a certain tribe were plotting to murder him on a certain day, led by a so-called holy man, or marabout. He set off alone to where they were encamped, holding a conclave to decide what exactly his fate should be. Galloping into the midst of them, he pistolled the two leaders, shouting, 'Your hour has come—not mine! Allah protects me!' Then he turned his horse and galloped away. Two days afterwards the remaining heads of the tribe appeared before him to make confession and beg forgiveness. They believed their plot against his life had been revealed to him by supernatural means. Superstition is alive all over the desert."

He said all this in a low, level, and almost indifferent voice.

"Are you superstitious?" Noel was moved to ask.

"Very!" he replied. "We know practically nothing, little else, indeed, than that there are vast regions of knowledge on the edge of which we stand but which are sealed from us. You see that lighted doorway?"

"Yes."

"That is a hashish café. Shall we look in for a moment?"

"Yes. I should like to."

They paused in the darkness, stood still, and looked in.

The interior was shadowy. The walls, perhaps long ago white, were now stained by the action of the smoke. The floor was of dirty brick with some tattered straw matting spread partially over it. On the right-hand side of the room, which was fairly large and ended in a mysterious darkness, was a red-hot brazier with various utensils heaped near it. Round the walls there were wooden benches. On them were huddled four shrouded figures. As Noel and Sabatier stood watching a hashish pipe with a long stem was going from hand to hand, slowly, each of the addicts taking one puff at the precious drug of which he was the willing victim.

But Noel's attention was drawn to and held by a solitary figure in a loose shirt of dingy white linen, with bare legs and feet and a head crowned with a badly folded turban. This figure was performing a solemn and mysterious dance, with head thrown back, uncovered long brown throat, and eyes nearly shut. Slowly it circled round the shadowy room, making scarcely any sound with its naked feet, which shuffled very gently over the matting or occasionally slithered over the dingy bricks. The mouth of the dancer was slightly open, and a faint whiteness of teeth showed between the lips. Now and again the arms were extended, the dirty sleeves falling back from them, then were feebly dropped to the sides. No sound of music accompanied this strange and stealthy dance, every movement of which looked vague and yet surreptitious.

"What is it? Why does he do that?" whispered Noel.

"That is a dream dance of the hashish. He is moved to do it by the drug."

They turned from the doorway and walked on slowly in silence, the sand cart following behind them, the creaking of its large wheels coming to them through the darkness. Presently Noel said:

"I shall never understand these desert people."

There was a melancholy desperation in his voice.

"You can, I suppose?" he added.

"Partially. I have lived a great deal among them. I should miss them terribly if I had to go away and live always in France. We rule out here, we French. But I sometimes feel that in spite of that they are more free than we are. And however long one lives among them they keep most of themselves entirely hidden from us. Perhaps much of the African fascination comes from just that—the mystery. In Europe there may be much that is mysterious. Philosophers have said that every human being carries with him his mystery. But one does not feel it as one does out here. At least I do not."

"Could you ever have a real friend among the natives?"

"De la Rochefoucauld has said, '*Un véritable ami est le plus grand de tous les biens et celui de tous qu'on songe le moins à acquérir.*' I have met among the desert people a few I think I could trust. I have not met one yet who I think could love me in the true friend's way. That may be my fault. But

if so I believe the fault lies in my being European rather than in anything else."

He smiled slightly as he said the last words. Then in a lighter way he added :

"The less one judges them the more one understands them."

"Are they critical of us ?" asked Noel.

"Ah, yes—very !"

He stopped. They were now in the Grande Place, which was deserted except for two or three watchmen who were going their rounds, their guns pointing over their shoulders.

"I must say good night here," he said, and held out his hand.

Noel took it. As he let it go he said :

"I was interested in what you said to-night about the dancing girl who wears the green shawl."

"Ah !"

His strange far-seeing eyes were suddenly concentrated on Noel.

"You have seen her then ?"

"Yes. I saw her one night in the court."

"And do you agree with me about her ?"

"It struck me—I—it seemed to me that she was quite different from the other women."

"She has a strange beauty. If I took her to Paris men would go mad about her."

A curious expression that seemed to be of relief showed in Noel's face. Sabatier noticed it with interest. But Noel only said :

"Well, good night. I live in a tent near the oasis of N'Goussa. I hope I shall see you there one day."

"I shall come."

Then they said good night again and parted. Noel mounted into the sand cart and disappeared, accompanied by the music of the creaking wheels. Sabatier walked slowly towards his home not far off. As he went he said to himself :

"Why that look of relief ?"

It had puzzled him. He thought about it as he sat later on the divan in his dimly lit sitting-room smoking a hubble-bubble. He had a subtle mind and liked to be clear about things. Presently he came to a conclusion.

"The Englishman is tremendously attracted by the girl in the green shawl and was relieved to find I thought she would attract other European men. Probably he felt that excused in him what he had looked upon as a folly to be ashamed of. He is very conventional, and the lack of conventionality here startles him. He must be nearly thirty, but he's rather like a boy waking up to life. So—after seeing her dance he went to her room in the court !"

He was wrong there. Noel's innocent remark had deceived him.

## PHASE TWO

### ILLUSION

WHEN he reached the camp that night Noel found the cook there alone. He enquired by signs and two or three Arabic words where Taha was and gathered that he was away for the night without leave. Noel at once guessed the reason for his absence and was very angry. In the morning when Taha returned, only just in time to bring Noel his breakfast, Noel scolded him and asked what he meant by staying out without asking permission.

"I won't have it. If it occurs again you shall leave my service."

Taha looked very sulky and obstinate.

"Why did you do it? What were you up to?"

Taha smiled faintly.

"I know!" exclaimed Noel. "You went to the women!"

"Yes, sir. We not all like you, Mister Nowill. You must lettin us out sometimes."

Noel said nothing for a moment. He was battling with an ugly feeling almost of hatred. He felt as if Taha had injured him personally. Meanwhile Taha stood by, staring at him. At last Noel said:

"Anyhow, I forbid either of you ever to go out again without asking permission."

"Yes, sir, we askin you suttinly. Amar likin to go to-night."

This calm statement stung Noel to increased irritation.

"Upon my word——" he began.

But Taha broke in:

"You very fine man, and when we needin goin out at night always askin you first. Amar very pleased to-night seein his wife."

"Oh—his *wife*!" said Noel with a sudden absurd sense of relief.

"Of course! What you thinkin?" asked Taha, apparently astonished. "Amar livin in Touggourt."

After a moment of silence Noel said:

"*Your* wife isn't here, is she?"

"My wives—no!" said Taha, amazed. "My two wives always in Biskra. How they comin here?"

"Of course not! Of course not! Well, Amar can go to-night. And—and you can go now and then. But not often. And you must always ask first. And one of you must always be here."

"Yes, sir. One of us always stayin with you, suttinly. Amar very pleased 'bout to-night."

So it was settled. Reluctantly Noel had to give in. But he felt profound irritation, combined with a sense of personal injury.

Life in Touggourt now became different to Noel. He knew influential people and was known to them. No doubt he was talked about. His behaviour and conduct would henceforth be subject to criticism. If he did anything exceptional it would be noticed. He felt that perhaps he ought to let his French acquaintances know that he was a clergyman. But if he did so wouldn't he go always in fetters so long as he remained in the desert? Everyone would expect him to 'behave like a clergyman.' He couldn't

bear that now the new longing for freedom was boiling up in him. So he held his peace and kept his clerical clothes under lock and key.

Of course he had no obligations towards these people. Then why should he care what they thought of him? But he knew that he did and would care. And he realized that he was specially anxious to be approved of by Madame de Pleunier. He didn't know why unless it was because she was obviously a woman of the world, acute and apparently full of bitter contempt for the women loved by the desert men. And perhaps loved, too, by others? What about Bernard? What about Sabatier? And—perhaps even her husband, the Commandant? Could her contempt have a very intimate cause?

Noel was becoming more curious and slightly more subtle about the affairs of his neighbours than he had been in England at Upper Green. Perhaps the desert was beginning to enlarge his mind; perhaps the gradual awakening of his body was leading him on.

He duly paid his call at the Commandant's quarters and found Madame de Pleunier at home. She was very civil to him, indeed almost more than merely civil. She showed a definite interest in his Saharan experiment. Was his health getting better? Did he feel that he was on the way to complete recovery? Was he glad that he had taken the amazing advice of the London specialist? He assured her that he was glad and that he was beginning to feel very much better. He could now ride for hours without undue fatigue. He had been out shooting. He slept splendidly and had a big appetite. Now and then of course there were slight setbacks, but now he was convinced that the cure would work.

"And when late April comes?" she asked. "You can't stay on here then. Fever rages. You mustn't run into danger."

(She looked at his thick brown hair which had been touched up by the sun.)

"What do you mean to do then?"

This question caused Noel to question himself about that for the first time seriously.

"I don't know yet," he said.

He considered for a moment, then added:

"I think I'd rather not go back to England. There must be places in Africa that——"

"Any number," she interrupted. "Sidi Bou Said wouldn't be bad."

"Where is that?"

"On a hill beyond Tunis, looking over what I call the gates of Africa. A lovely white village. Good bathing. A glorious view. The plain of Carthage, mountains, the sea. I once spent a summer there."

A curious change came into her face when she said that, a look almost of tenderness into her usually rather hard red-brown eyes. But it vanished directly and was replaced by the rather mechanical social smile that seemed characteristic of her.

"Generally I go back to Paris. I don't want to go completely native as some do out here, some whom we know."

The 'we' surprised Noel. She must mean either Bernard and Sabatier, or one of those two men and her own husband, or all three of the men at the dinner.

"Be careful—*you!*" she added with a rather wry smile. "This is a dangerous land for many Europeans: soldiers and—others. Do you know

I am beginning to take quite an interest in you? I hope you don't mind?"

Noel had very thick curly brown hair that grew to a point on his forehead. As she said the last two sentences she looked at it again and kept her eyes on it.

"If next summer you should decide to go to Sidi Bou Saïd I will give you one or two introductions to friends of mine in that neighbourhood," she added.

"Oh—you are kind!"

"The Resident General and his wife among them. They spend the hot season in a delightful place at La Marsa, where the Bey and his family live. How often have I bathed near there from a solitary bathing *plage*! Are you a swimmer?"

"I can swim. But I'm not very good at it."

"I can swim for hours."

She stopped, then added abruptly:

"You and I must be friends."

Noel assented with almost confused cordiality. When he left her he thought over the visit and came to the conclusion that she was a woman with a grievance against North Africa and that she wanted very much some sort of sympathy. How strangely she had looked at his hair. He wondered why. She seemed ready to like him. Did he like her? He began to think that he did, or could. At the same time he felt slightly afraid of her. She knew obviously so very much more of the world and of life in general than he did. But she was considerably older than he was. She was handsome, smart, and had a beautiful figure. Still she must be somewhere about forty. Or perhaps even a year or two more. Her husband looked at least fifty-five. Were they happy together?

Noel did not believe that Captain Sabatier liked her very much. Something in his tone when he had spoken of her on their nocturnal walk. Was Sabatier one of those who, according to Madame de Pleunier, had 'gone native'? As she had certainly alluded to the men who had been at the dinner, Noel thought that he must be. There was something about him—something unusual and strange. But Noel liked him, even was drawn to him. And he had no undercurrent of irritated feeling against him such as he had had against Bernard and might have again if he allowed his mind to dwell upon those hours of work, which no doubt were still filling up a great part of Bernard's days.

Noel was consciously struggling against something now, his persistent desire to go again to the women's quarters in the Avenue de Biskra and to see once more the dancing girl in the bright green shawl. He knew this desire, if he satisfied it, could not possibly lead to contentment of any kind, but only to much further irritation of his nervous system. Nothing could come of it but an increase of his restlessness of body and perturbation of mind. His absurd jealousy of Bernard, kept down lately, would be heaped up again. The flame which he had tried, with some success, to damp down would be blown up into activity. It would be madness to see her again. But he wanted to—terribly.

His meeting with Sabatier had made him feel that the fascination this Ouled Nail girl had cast over him so suddenly was not quite crazy, was not totally without reason. Sabatier had said that if he took her to Paris and presented her to Paris in the right way, 'produced' her, as it were, properly,



she would set Paris in a flame. And Bernard had chosen to use her as a model. Here then were two men, both men of the world, who saw something rare in her, something exceptional. He was not the only one to feel the physical lure of her. Many men, perhaps most men, would feel it too. And yet she could have no education, no knowledge of any kind, except the ugly knowledge that belonged to her abominable trade. It was impossible for him ever to get to 'know' her, for he didn't speak more than two or three words of her language. Scarcely, indeed, even that much. There could never be communion of any kind between them except the communion of bodies. The attraction she had for him must be entirely physical. And thinking over the English girls he had met, nearly all of them belonged to the conventional, so-called 'healthy' English type, Noel was not sure that this girl was even beautiful. Strange, she certainly was. Perhaps it was just that which attracted him so abominably—her strangeness. It seemed to mean so much, so very much. And yet perhaps, probably even, it meant nothing at all.

He wondered whether she attracted the desert men more than the other women of the tribe, who did not attract him at all, who even repelled him. He wondered what exactly her age was. An English girl of her age would, he supposed, be just a schoolgirl.

Thinking and thinking about this girl in despite of himself, Noel presently came to a conclusion. Either he must see her again or he had better leave Touggourt and go to some other place in the desert equally good for his health. Since the dinner at Bernard's, for some obscure reason, his desire for her had increased. Sabatier had something to do with that, and perhaps even Madame de Pleunier. The latter's almost bitterly contemptuous remarks about the Ouled Nail women had made Noel understand that other men than himself, and not desert men, sometimes felt their lure. And when a woman abuses other women it generally means that those women have an unholy attraction for men.

Even a man so innocent and so ignorant as Noel realized that.

No doubt if he went away in a very short time he would, if not forget all about this girl, entirely lose the obstinate longing for her which was becoming a persecution to him. It could not continue if leagues of desert lay between them, between him and the men who went to see her whenever they were inclined to, between him and Bernard, for instance, between him and Sabatier.

He wondered about Sabatier and the girl. He liked Sabatier, was interested in Sabatier, even more interested than he was in Bernard, and in a different way—without the constant prick of a secret irritation. Even when Sabatier had said that about the girl and Paris, Noel had felt pleased, not angry. If Bernard had said it he would have felt differently. Why? Probably, almost certainly, because of his hateful knowledge of the painter's licence in connection with her, the licence a profession allowed, even consecrated.

He must draw from the life, paint from the life. Damnable!

If Noel went again to the women's quarters to see that girl he didn't want Madame de Pleunier to know of it. But why should she know of it?

Already in the belly of the desert he was beginning to feel the accursed yoke of 'Public Opinion.'

Sabatier came to see him, on horseback, as Bernard had come. And Noel, still engaged in his struggle with himself as to what he should do,

whether to stay on in Touggourt or to flee from it, enquired of Sabatier about other desert places, stating frankly his exact condition of health.

"But why leave here before the heats make this place dangerous to the average European?" said Sabatier, sitting with him in the sunshine before the door of the tent. "You know some of us now. Madame de Pleunier told me you had been to see her."

"Yes, I did go."

"And that she liked you very much."

Noel felt warmly pleased.

"Oh—I'm glad. Did she?"

"Yes. And she said what nice hair you had."

"Oh, really!"

Noel felt himself redden.

"I doubt if you could do better than to stay on here. Of course there are other desert places that you might try. There's Laghouat, for instance. There is Bou Saada, where Bernard has been living for years. Are you tired of Touggourt already?"

"No. I like being here."

"Then why change? But I know what bodily restlessness is, and especially in the desert. One always wants to go further—over the deep blue horizon."

His eyes, as he said that, suddenly changed, held their far-away look.

"It isn't that with me," said Noel, moved to be partially frank.

"No? It's well for me that I am held tight by duty. Otherwise——"

He did not ask Noel for any explanation of his reason for perhaps leaving Touggourt, if he did go. Noel felt that this man, unlike Bernard, perhaps, was remarkably free—perhaps released would be the better word—from curiosity, whether ordinary or highly intelligent. There was something large and remote about him, something spacious which seemed to accord with the desert. His life in the desert had perhaps purged him of even intelligent curiosity, of the psychological itch which urges many clever men to enquire deeply into their fellows. Or perhaps he understood quickly without need of probing. Had his far-seeing eyes also a peculiarly acute nearer vision which was seldom apparent? Did he seem indifferent because he gathered knowledge without effort and without showing that he was a reaper?

There was something about him which Noel began to feel he could trust. He even felt that he would not very much mind Sabatier's knowing of the strange obsession which was causing the present struggle within him.

When Sabatier left Noel that day he said:

"I hope you will decide to stay on."

"Oh—thank you!" said Noel eagerly.

"But you must on no account stay longer than, say, mid-April."

"Why is that?"

"The oukheum comes then very often."

"What is it?"

"A malignant African fever. In your delicate state of health it would be dangerous for you to stand up to. Our doctors know how to meet it in many cases. It is not so devastating as it used to be. But you are new to this region and mustn't stay then."

"I will take your advice. I think I may go for the summer to Sidi Bou Saïd in Tunisia."

"Ah! You have heard about that?"

He looked rather surprised.

"Yes. Madame de Pleunier told me."

When Noel said this a rather strange look that seemed blended of satire with something quite different, perhaps soft understanding, transformed Sabatier's deeply sunburned face for an instant. But he only said :

"You could not do better. It's a little white native paradise with a view to make the very stones sing."

"I think I shall go there. I don't feel I want to go back to England. My health, you know."

"A good reason."

"If I have a whole year, or rather a year and a half, in the African climate, I have hopes of being entirely set up. And then I can go back to work."

He said the last words for himself and thoughtlessly, telling himself that was how it would be. But directly he had spoken them he wished he had not. Sabatier would no doubt enquire about his work. It would be quite natural to do so. But he did not yet at all fully know Sabatier, who merely said :

"As you say you're already making good progress, by then you would probably be perfectly well. I believe in this climate. That is, in winter. And a summer in Sidi Bou Said, with the bathing and the pure air blowing from the sea and over the plain of Carthage, would be delicious. I once even had to spend a whole summer in Tunis, in barracks, and I did not suffer at all. Many a man would envy you your unorthodox cure."

And then he mounted his horse and rode off.

Directly he had gone Taha came to the tent and asked to have the night off. Probably it was that request—Noel wasn't sure—which prompted him to rush upon what even then he thought of as trouble. At first he was on the point of brusquely telling Taha he couldn't go. If anyone went it was the cook's turn to go. But even as he opened his lips to refuse an almost brutally sullen look warned him to be careful. He was painfully dependent on Taha. Perhaps he had better put up with these desert people as he couldn't change them. But if so, if he had to let Taha go, he suddenly resolved he would go himself too. He wouldn't be left to sit by the lamp and read Wordsworth or the *Essays of Elia*. That in his present state of feeling would be intolerable.

"You can go after my dinner," he said.

"Thank you, sir."

"And perhaps I'll walk in with you. I'll see when dinner is over."

Taha smiled. Not his sickly smile which Noel so hated, but a knowing, almost a twinkling smile.

"But how you comin home, Mister Nowill?" he asked.

"I'll manage. Perhaps I'll find a sand cart to bring me as I did the other night."

"Yes, sir."

Taha went away, smiling.

During his dinner Noel pretended to himself that he was debating the question whether to go or not. Really he meant to go. He felt driven and beyond self-control. Why should he alone of the many men here live the unnatural life of a prude, locking himself up in prison while everyone else went free? But he pretended that he hadn't quite decided. Perhaps he would stay on in the camp, with the cook, and go early to bed after reading

a classic. He even, again pretending, thought he would choose to read Shakespeare's sonnets.

Taha cleared the table with his usual deliberation and departed to the kitchen tent slowly. While going there he twice looked round at his master. Noel was lighting a pipe. Taha vanished into the tent.

A few minutes passed. Noel sat smoking in the not strong lamplight, hearing, as always, the distant barking of dogs. He was tingling all over with an acute physical impatience such as he had never felt before. This night monotony was becoming intolerable. In the day all went well enough. He had the long rides and had come to know that there is nothing like horse exercise to send up the spirits. He had the shooting expeditions. Every day something to do. But these lonely, unpeopled nights!

Reading was no longer what it had been to him. Now he felt that he read rather to dull than to enliven the mind.

He recalled certain passages in great authors against the reading of many books. Hadn't Goethe stated that much reading was dangerous? Hadn't Schopenhauer caustically advised against it? Perhaps he had read far too much. Stuffed his mind while starving his body. His health had suffered from that, if Doctor Rutherford Craven were right. But now he was turning away from books and was turning towards life. He was taking a holiday from books. But he still read something every night in the tent. He could read something now—if he decided against going to Touggourt with Taha. He glanced towards the small collection of volumes he had brought out from England with lack-lustre eyes. He felt a distaste for reading. Nevertheless, perhaps it would be wiser to stay in the camp than to go by night to the town. He felt like a man on the edge of something. But there was still time to draw back and away.

A voice came to him from the darkness.

"You comin with me, sir?"

It was Taha. Noel sat for a moment without answering.

"You not comin, Mister Nowill?"

"Yes, I'm coming. One moment while I get my burnous!"

On the way to the town, as they drew near to the dark rummage of houses clustered closely together in the wilderness of the sands, Taha said:

"Where I taking you, sir? Where you wantin to go?"

There was something intimidating in his voice that suggested an intimacy of mind from which Noel recoiled.

"I'll see when we get there," he answered coldly.

After a moment he added:

"Where are *you* going?"

"Anywhere you wantin, Mister Nowill. I not particler."

So Taha didn't choose to say. But of course he was going to the Ouled Nails. Where else should he go? Noel had always known why Taha needed nights away from the camp. And surely Taha knew why he, Noel, was going to Touggourt. But Noel, though he realized this, had no illusions about the Arab perspicacity in all matters connected with the material needs of the male human being and his physical wants, felt that he couldn't accompany his servant a second time to the dancing house. To do that would establish a sort of intimacy between them now which would be loathsome to him. Though he was in the belly of the desert he wasn't like such a man, for instance, as Bernard, who had lived among the Arabs so long that he didn't care what they knew of him. There still clung about Noel

sensitive delicacies which, were they known, would rouse into activity the satirical faculties of the French officers quartered in Touggourt and which the Arabs would simply be unable to understand.

"I'm going to pay a visit to Monsieur Bernard," he said, coming to a hasty decision.

"Then I leavin you there," rejoined Taha. "And seein you in the mornin."

"Yes. You must be back for my breakfast."

Noel walked on, wondering whether Taha's Arab sharpness had pierced through his hypocrisy. Probably it had. But anyhow he couldn't bring himself to go to the women's quarters that night with Taha.

Therefore, when they arrived in the Avenue de Biskra and already heard the fierce music in the dancing house flooding out into the night from the distance, he said :

"You needn't come with me to Monsieur Bernard's house. You can leave me in the avenue. To go home I shall get a sand cart."

"How you gettin it? Shall I——?"

"No. I'll manage. Leave me in the avenue."

"Very well, sir."

A moment later Noel said :

"That's all. You can leave me here. Good night."

"Good night, Mister Nowill."

And Taha sauntered slowly away, leaving Noel at the turn of the sandy lane which led to the house Ali Bey hired out to add to his income.

When he got there he stood for a moment before the door in the archway. He hadn't come to Touggourt to see the painter. He had no wish to see him that night. On the other hand, he didn't want to go at once to the women's court, following Taha, who must be going there now. There must be an interval between his going and Taha's. He couldn't immediately follow his servant after dismissing him. If Bernard were at home he would stay with him for a few minutes and then make an excuse to go. He felt now that he didn't care what Bernard thought. He shrank, perhaps foolishly, from Taha's knowledge, Taha's opinion. Bernard was different. If he knew all he might be amused, but not in Taha's ugly, down-pulling way.

Noel lifted a hand and knocked hard on the door. It wasn't answered immediately. He waited, then knocked again. He hadn't made up his mind whether he wished to find Bernard at home or not. He was only doing this to get rid of Taha and to fill up a little time. The angry music in the distance was calling him, summoning him. But perhaps it would be best if Bernard was in. Not necessary to stay long with him.

Soon after his second knock the door was gently opened, and the tall Arab youth stood looking out. Seeing Noel, he salaamed, bending from the waist with crossed arms, the hands flat against the shoulders. Noel asked in French if the painter were in.

"*Oui, moosoo, mais oon po malade,*" was the hesitating reply.

But immediately after speaking he stood aside, with a graceful gesture inviting Noel to come in. Noel shook his head and murmured something in vague French. But the youth insisted in pantomime, and Noel stepped doubtfully into the arcade, where he was left while the youth quitted him and glided softly up the stairs at the end of the court. He was away for two or three minutes, then returned, stood at the foot of the staircase, and

beckoned to Noel to come up. Noel followed him, wondering what was the matter. It seemed to him that the youth's manner was mysterious.

They walked a few steps by the painted railing, then turned through a narrow doorway into a whitewashed bedroom, which contained a handsome Arab bed with four brilliantly painted posts and a silk canopy for ceiling. Bernard was lying in this bed, propped against some large pillows. He looked rather feverish, and his large eyes seemed brighter than usual, abnormally bright, but he didn't look very ill.

"I am so sorry to hear you are not well," said Noel. "What is it? Fever?"

"Yes, fever. A touch of malaria, that's all."

When he said the last two words Noel felt that he was telling a lie.

"Does one get malaria here in the winter, then?" he asked.

"I do—now and then. Do sit down for a moment. That chair there."

Noel sat down.

"Who told you I was ill and laid up?" asked Bernard, suspiciously, Noel thought.

"No one. Taha was coming in. I was getting a little bit bored in camp and thought I'd stroll in too. And finding myself here, thought I'd look you up."

"That was all!" Bernard said, as if relieved. "There's such a lot of gossip here among the few French that I thought some of them might have been talking some nonsense about me."

"No. Not a word," said Noel, surprised.

What surprised him was the obvious uneasiness shown by Bernard which seemed to contradict Noel's conception of his character. Till now Noel had envied him for being entirely indifferent to the opinion of others. True, he had only asserted indifference to that opinion. But all that Noel had seen of him had tended to a suggestion of a general widespread indifference. And here he was showing an almost sensitive anxiety about such a trifle as a slight attack of malaria.

"Are you taking quinine?" Noel said doubtfully, with a feeling that for some reason he couldn't fathom he was being deceived.

"Of course! Of course!" said Bernard impatiently.

And then there was a slight silence, which Noel felt as decidedly awkward. It was broken by the painter, who, turning a little on the pillows, but with apparent care, even precaution, said:

"I shall be up again almost directly. I've got a marvellous constitution. But after so many years spent mainly in Africa one is liable to an occasional touch of malaria."

"Captain Sabatier told me the other day that I must get away in April."

"Ah, the oukheum, I suppose."

"Yes, it was that."

"That's a danger. I've never had it. But I've never been here later than the early days of April."

There was another silence. Noel felt very definitely that he had better go. Bernard was certainly not in a mood for talking. There must be something weighing on his mind. Noel was getting quite a different view of him from that which he had hitherto held. But that might be the fault of malaria. Even a touch of that recurrent malady is apt to depress a man, to lessen his masculine self-possession.

He got up.

"I'll go now. I only came up because your servant evidently wished me to, though he told me you were a little ill."

"That's it. Only a little. I shall be up again almost directly. And I wanted to see you. Are you going to the dancing house?"

"Yes. I think I will look in there for a few minutes. By the way, how is your painting getting on?"

"I haven't quite satisfied myself yet," said Bernard. "Good night."

As Noel went away Bernard turned again on his pillows, and again with obvious precaution.

What was really the matter with Bernard? Noel asked himself that as he walked down the sandy lane towards the shrieking pipe and the thudding tom-tom, whose music demanded him from the near-by dancing house. There was something more and other than the malaria Bernard had confessed to. Noel was certain of that and wondered. The painter had seemed to him such an open, definite man, indifferent to the scrutiny and opinion of his neighbours, though himself searching and observant, and probably in secret a severe and accurate judge. That night he had been uneasy, like a man who had something to hide. And he had shown anxiety about the possible French opinion in Touggourt concerning his illness. Then that curious precaution of the body when it turned against the piled-up pillows. What did that mean?

Some mystery in that whitewashed bedroom. But the eyes there were certainly feverish. They might be the eyes of malaria.

Noel wondered if the Arab youth knew more than he did. His manner had been mysterious.

When Noel reached the Avenue de Biskra he stood still in hesitation. Afterwards he often thought of that man of thirty, wrapped in his burnous, pausing in the sand at the turn of the lane under the African stars, to European eyes abnormally bright, listening to the barbaric summons that came from the dancing house. The turn of a lane and the turn of a life? What should decide? The free will of a mortal man? The decision of Destiny? Should he go back at once to the camp? Or should he visit the dancing house? He felt certain that Taha was there. Possibly not in the dancing house itself but in the women's quarter attached to it. Taha, whether in the one or the other, would certainly get to know of his presence and would smile with Arab satire over his hypocrisy.

"I'm angry with him for doing what I want to do myself!"

An ugly discovery of his weak humanity! It would not surprise Taha. Noel was sure that Taha had for long been expecting it. But one didn't always choose to give a man what he was expecting from you. And for several minutes Noel stood there in hesitation. But the summons of the fierce music was too persistent and too strong, and at last he gave in to it. What did it matter if Taha laughed to himself or laughed with Amar, the cook, because the patron was, after all, only on their own level when it came to the essential, the fundamental? (Not that they would think of it as exactly that.) What did anything matter? A man must live his own life, as all the men did resolutely and in the eye of the sun out here in the belly of the desert.

Noel walked towards the sound of the music. Perhaps he would only go in for a short time, sit on the hard lower tier of the terraces, drink the

sweet coffee, and watch the dance of the hands. His mind murmured this 'perhaps.' But he knew it would not be so.

There were, as before, many men, soldiers and others, going in and out of the court of the Ouled Nails, in and out of the dancing house. Noel saw Spahis, booted and spurred, their scarlet cloaks flung over their shoulders, their tall white headdresses giving a masculine dignity to their dark-featured, hawklike faces, and gleaming black eyes; Chasseurs d'Afrique in cloaks of light grey, partially concealing blue-and-red uniforms; members of an irregular levy wearing red boots and black burnouses; some men of the Foreign Legion; two young sailors strayed here from the seacoast on leave, smart in blue and white with red pompons on their round caps and the larky eyes of boys out for a spree. And there were natives in snow-white burnouses, and camel drivers in coarser burnouses striped with dull yellow and black. It seemed to be a specially busy night, for the court was more thronged than it had been on Noel's first visit, and nearly all the women who were visible at the lighted doorways of their rooms were in intercourse with desert admirers.

Noel passed by without seeing Taha, though he looked swiftly over the court and met many dark eyes fixed upon him with the fierce enquiry of desert men searching and summing up the character of a Roumi. Perhaps Taha was in the dancing house. If so Noel couldn't miss him in spite of the crowd gathered round the thick columns and thronging the terraces, the white crowd with the staring eyes and the almost religiously concentrated expressions.

As he entered the noise of the music seemed to burst upon him like an assault, and he remembered Sabatier's remark that it acted on its hearers like an aphrodisiac. That was a true saying. Noel felt a stir in his blood that seemed to mount from his heart to his head, confusing him for a moment, giving him a feeling akin to intoxication. As he stood in the central alley that led to the platform where the musicians were enthroned with the dancing women he glanced quickly over the mass of men crowding to right and left of him. Again he did not see Taha. Perhaps he had not come to the women's quarters. More probably he had and was occupied and so out of sight. Noel looked up the alley, or aisle. His view of the platform was partially obscured for a moment by the bulky figures of two of the most opulent dancers, with the bulging contours so appreciated by the men of the desert and the Tunisians, who were posturing almost immediately in front of him, executing the stomach dance and mingling with it the brutal jerking to and fro, and from side to side, of heads, with the sharp thrust of the chin which suggests defiance or even contempt, but which seems to fascinate Arabs.

Suddenly irritated—and this irritation seemed to come to him from the music, the pipe, the embroidering flute, and the tom-tom or tambour—Noel tried to push past the dancers, but for an instant they did not give way, and lifting himself on the balls of his feet to get a better view of the platform, he stared towards the platform over their heaving and wriggling shoulders. Ah! She was there, the girl in the bright green shawl. After all these days and nights of waiting and self-control he saw her once more. There she sat close to the pipe player, who swayed violently to and fro as he played, often lifting his instrument towards the palmwood roof with a frenzied gesture. Beside her on a low stool was a tight little bunch of some desert flower which looked artificial and a glass of water. She was sitting quite



still, her almost animal calm contrasting strangely with the epileptic manner of the pipe player. Her henna-dyed hands, young and very soft-looking, lay in her lap. Her skirt was of some flimsy white material, spangled with silver. She wore on her head a handkerchief of several colours and a crown from which dangled gold coins. More gold coins hung round her girlish throat. There were big gold circles in her ears, and barbaric bracelets lay along her arms. With it all how young she looked, almost tender, sitting quietly there in a strangely indifferent pose! An idol looks ageless. Yet for a moment Noel thought she looked like a very young idol.

The two fat performers of the stomach dance separated at last, and Noel was able to walk on. As he looked quickly to find an empty place near the platform, the movement of a hand at the end of a raised arm caught his eyes, and he saw Madame de Pleunier seated beside Captain Sabatier on the right of the alley, beckoning to him, her mechanical smile in full play.

A feeling of angry distress and discomfort surged through him. Madame de Pleunier was the last person he wished to meet in these surroundings, the very last. Far rather would he have come upon Taha. He felt now that he didn't really care for Taha's opinion or knowledge of him. But he knew that he did care what Madame de Pleunier thought, or, worse, what she knew. He had gathered from his two meetings with her that she was painfully acute in the typical woman's way. She had antennæ out in all directions where any man was concerned, any man whom she knew. She missed little or nothing. And she was cruelly critical about African women. She had a fierce bias against them and probably, almost certainly, an intimate reason for it. He felt as he returned her smile and yielded perforce to her beckoning hand that his evening was entirely spoiled.

"How amusing to find you here!" was her greeting, the fixed smile still on her delicately painted lips. "Come! We'll make room for you. Captain Sabatier and I are having what you would call an evening 'off.' My husband was engaged to an official feast with one of the important Arabs. Dreadful events which last stickily for hours. So Jacques took pity on me. Do sit here."

She wore a hat and a deep brown cloak, which she pulled aside to give Noel more room. He sat down after greeting Sabatier.

"My servant had to come in to-night, so I thought I'd come with him," he said uncomfortably, glancing at Sabatier and wondering suddenly whether Sabatier liked Madame de Pleunier, or whether he had to accommodate himself to her wishes because she was the wife of his chief. "On the way here I called for a few minutes to see Monsieur Bernard."

When he said that Noel noticed that the faces of both his acquaintances changed. An expression of close scrutiny altered them both. But the scrutiny of Madame de Pleunier was femininely sharp, whereas Sabatier's looked less sharp than profound and mingled with melancholy. Yet both, in their differences, seemed alike in one thing: both seemed to ask a question.

"How did you find him?" asked Madame de Pleunier.

"Oh, then you knew he was ill?" said Noel, wondering at the odd significance in her voice.

"I heard there was something the matter," she said, glancing at Sabatier, who now seemed intent on the posturing dancers and whose face had lost its scrutinizing expression.

"Yes, he was in bed with malaria," said Noel, realizing, as he had realized

in the whitewashed bedroom, that there was something odd about Bernard's ill-health, something mysterious.

"Malaria—is it?" said Madame de Pleunier, again glancing at Sabatier, who avoided her glance.

"He said so," said Noel.

"Ah! I almost wonder he was able to see you, let you in. Did you stay long?"

"Oh, no. Not much more than five minutes. I felt I had better not."

"And yet he let you in! I wonder why."

This remark was so odd and so oddly spoken, with a sort of almost drawling irony incomprehensible to Noel, that he was startled by it. He could not imagine what caused it or against whom—the painter or himself—it was directed. Sabatier still sat in silence, watching the wriggling shoulders, fluttering hands, mincing steps, and rotating stomachs of the two dancers.

"But why shouldn't he?" he asked, showing his surprise.

"One heard he was too unwell to be seen—for a day or two."

"His servant told him I had called, and he sent to ask me to come up. But I only stayed for a very short time."

"Did he look ill?"

"Not specially. His eyes seemed rather feverish. I suppose malaria

A sharply ironic expression altered her face. It was so sudden, so definite, and so very unsympathetic that Noel did not finish his sentence. Was he making a fool of himself? Why should she—

The piper let out a prolonged shriek and stopped dead but not on a final note. The European ear, at any rate, demanded a full close but was deprived of it. The tom-tom player thudded on for an instant while the flute seemed to go thinly mad. Then there was a hot silence. In it the two dancers waddled, rather than walked, back to the platform and sat heavily down on the seats provided for them.

"And now," said Madame de Pleunier, "I suppose we are going to have the *clou* of the evening."

"What's that?" said Noel, glad to get away from the subject of Bernard's illness, which obviously entailed underthings which he sensed but which he was entirely unable to understand.

"Don't you remember at Bernard's dinner the other evening Sabatier raving to us about the girl who dances here in a bright green shawl? There she is!"

She pointed with a narrow delicate hand tipped with shining nails towards the platform.

"Oh, is that she?" Noel said, trying to speak with a casual, indifferent air.

"Yes; you have come just in time. Sabatier promised me that she should dance for us to-night. After what he said about Paris going mad about her, if he presented her there, of course dressed by one of the great designers and *coiffée à la mode*—"

"Not necessarily *à la mode*," Sabatier interrupted in his level, rather deep voice. "But in the right mode for her."

"As you please! I was curious to see her. I was born and brought up in Paris, Monsieur Herriot, and I think I have some idea of what Paris will stand—in a woman."

"She's a mere girl," said Sabatier quietly.

"Or girl. But can one of these women be properly called a girl? They are old already when, by years, they may be called young. In my view they have no youth. To have youth one must have freshness. Even innocence is an attribute that makes half the fascination of youth. But these Ouled Nail creatures have never known what innocence means. They are *féttries* from the start."

The fierce music began again. The girl in the green shawl got up from her seat. As she did so into Madame de Pleunier's red-brown eyes there came a piercingly hard expression, and her lips tightened into a grim line. Sabatier glanced at her, then looked at Noel, and smiled faintly. Obviously he was obtaining a secret enjoyment from this unintentional display of feminine nature which was making Noel acutely uncomfortable and even tended to make him feel angry. Perhaps he wanted Noel to share his half-malicious amusement, but Noel was too socially raw to do that and had also too much absurdly personal feeling, such as surely Sabatier lacked. Madame de Pleunier's obvious hostility in advance to the youthful dancer, a hostility so acute that it deprived her for the moment of her social consciousness and awareness of her companions, roused in him a feeling of chivalrous anger which was almost boyish. The girl in the green shawl didn't care what the Frenchwoman thought of her. One of the distinguishing traits of all the Ouled Nail women, Noel thought, was their animal indifference to scrutiny and apparently total lack of mental response to those who surrounded them and were intent upon them. If they had minds those minds were surely remote from all the minds attending to them. One night, Noel found himself thinking, almost as well expect mental response from an ox in a field as from an Ouled Nail woman in an African dancing house. Nevertheless, he felt angry with Madame de Pleunier and foolishly on the defensive.

The girl was now joined by another dancer in brilliant pink, much older than she was and more laden with jewels and coins, and the usual dance of the hands was repeated.

"But it's always the same!" said Madame de Pleunier with contempt in her voice. "The same old thing over and over again. They all flutter their hands and jerk their heads to and fro in exactly the same way. Really, Jacques"—she was speaking to Sabatier in French—"from all you said about that girl I thought we should see something new."

"I spoke of her appearance. I did not speak of her art of dancing. I did not say she could conquer Paris as a dancer."

"But this everlasting repetition!"

"*Ma chère amie*," said Sabatier in a familiar tone that made Noel, simple in certain matters though he was, wonder for a moment, "you ought to know by this time that out here in the desert men are not like Parisians, always searching and shrieking for novelty. For them there is a magic in sameness, sameness of sands, of sunshine, of cloudless blue skies, of burning heat in the many hot months, even sameness of food and drink. Water instead of our many wines and liqueurs, couscous instead of our multitudinous *plats*."

He turned to Noel and continued in English:

"I have always thought that the Israelites who complained of the perpetual manna in the wilderness cannot have been true Orientals. Perhaps that's why they were destroyed by serpents. Because of their unnatural

lamentations. To me part of the fascination out here is just the monotony of which Madame de Pleunier complains."

"Don't be absurd, Jacques!" said Madame de Pleunier with evident irritation. "You can't pretend to me that this *danse du ventre* and this absurd head wagging has any fascination for you. It's only that it amuses you always to differ from other people."

Suddenly she seemed to become sharply conscious of Noel again.

"Sabatier is like that. He's the spirit of contradiction. But *you* must agree with me?"

Her eyes searched him, apparently demanding agreement.

"You can't care for that girl's dancing, surely?"

"It's certainly very odd," said Noel, conscious of being banal. "But of course all this is quite new to me. I'm not tired of it *yet*"—the expression of her eyes made him hastily add that "yet"—"because I've never seen it before."

In spite of himself he was forced into a faint defence of the green-shawl dancer.

"Do you mean that you like it, then? Look at those jerks! They're obscene. That's all. There's no beauty in them, no grace. They're just simply obscene. And, of course, that's why the Arabs like them. The fact is the people out here are just animals."

"And the people in Paris?" said Sabatier, always in his calm voice with the faint tinge of melancholy in it, unless he was being mischievous or was moved by his subtle sense of humour. "Are they not animals?"

"Paris, *our* Paris, may have its animal side——"

"I am glad you allow us so much!"

"—but it's immensely mental too. It bristles with mentality. It's almost fiercely intellectual. Where will you find more intelligence than in Paris? Why, the whole world knows it! All clever men want to know Paris, want to come and steep themselves in Paris. But out here in these desert places the mind goes to sleep. These people just live for the body. You can see it in their dances. And look at the crowd! They are so absurdly intent. One might suppose they were seeing it for the first time instead of for the hundredth time."

The two dancers were now a long way down the alley between the two lines of men. Noel could only see their backs, their upraised arms, and their fluttering hands. Madame de Pleunier's last words drew his attention to the fact that all those men were devouring the girl in the green shawl with their eyes. He had, of course, known of their concentration on the dancers before, but now he was made specially conscious of it. And it angered him. His evening was being spoiled by the companionship forced upon him. Why had he allowed himself to be drawn into the narrowly limited French society of Touggourt? Far better to know no one, to be solitary and, at any rate, free. He should have refused Bernard's invitation, have kept out of everything and let the French think of him what they liked, without knowing him. Already he was beginning to feel entangled, and especially so to-night in the dancing house.

The dancers turned in the alley and began to come slowly back, always with their tiny steps and those strangely indifferent eyes.

"They don't feel monotony as some of us do," said Sabatier. "On them it perhaps acts as a drug. And don't we know what a great part certain

drugs play in our so-called civilized life? Monotony has its way and its charm as well as variety."

"When it's a soporific, perhaps. But these horrible jerks and contortions have nothing soporific about them. And the music! It's always the same thing over and over again. A ceaseless frenzy. To listen to it is like having a meal of nothing but cayenne pepper. No, really, Jacques, you are a *blagueur*."

"But you must see that this girl has beauty," persisted Sabatier with a spurring obstinacy.

"She is so smothered up in cosmetics and preposterous ornaments that one can't see *what* she is really like. Let us go! Monsieur Herriot, you'll come with us, won't you? Come back to the house and have a drink. *We* don't live by the precepts of the Koran."

It was half-past eleven when Noel and Sabatier left the Commandant's house that night. He had not yet come back from his Arab dinner, and Madame de Pleunier did not want them to go and looked sleepless, but Noel said he had to get hold of a sand cart if possible and could not stay longer. For him it had not been a pleasant evening, and he felt that he had had as much of it as he could stand without showing his perturbation of mind. In her own house Madame de Pleunier had been sour-sweet. All undercurrents! Noel felt that there was a scarcely veiled hostility in her relation with Sabatier, though he was charming to her in a sometimes slightly teasing way which suggested close intimacy. They must surely be very old friends. Yet—this strange undercurrent of hostility!

Did she perhaps like Sabatier very much and because of that want him always to agree with her, to share her tastes, so far as a man could, and to feel about things as she did? That might account for her sour-sweet manner while they were having their drinks and for her irritation in the dancing house. For Sabatier was obviously a man who went his own way mentally and, no doubt, also physically. He was not the usual type of French soldier but an original. Noel did not understand Sabatier but was very much attracted by him and believed that, if given the chance, he could learn a great deal from him.

When they were out in the night Sabatier said:

"How do you expect to get hold of a sand cart at this hour?"

"I thought of going to the inn."

"They will all be asleep there by this time. They sleep early here and are all up with the dawn. Where is your servant?"

"Oh, I have given him leave to stay off for the night."

"About how long do you count it to walk back to your tent?"

"I should say about half an hour or less."

"Let us walk it. The night's divine, though it's rather cold."

"You don't mean to say you would walk there and back at this time of night?"

"Why not? I have often been up all night. I don't live by rule. I prefer to live by impulse. If you live by rule you miss almost everything."

When he said that Noel, in his simplicity, was struck by it and felt that it was profoundly true. And hadn't *he* lived always by rule? And wasn't he, so far, trying to live by rule even now?

"I expect you do," he said soberly, feeling for the moment rigid with

reserve, just because he longed to cast away all reserve with his companion but didn't know how to do it.

"Well, shall we walk? Or would you rather go and look for a sand cart? Though how we are to get hold of one at this hour I really don't know."

"I'll walk gladly. But I don't like to think of your walking all that way back alone."

"If your servant sleeps out all night you might let me have a rug in your servant's tent."

"Oh, I couldn't think of that!" exclaimed Noel.

"Why not? Many and many a time I have slept in tents with the Bedouin. They are fine fellows, though. Better than your Biskris and some of the rascals here."

As he spoke he began to walk on. And so they went together towards the oasis in the marvel of the still night.

Noel was wondering why Sabatier had offered to come with him. Was it, perhaps, merely because he had no wish to sleep and felt energetic? Had Sabatier taken a liking to him? It seemed so. The thought of that warmed him. He badly needed a friend. Bernard had been friendly, but he didn't live in Touggourt and might soon be going away. And Noel had that secret grudge against Bernard because of the episode with the girl in the green shawl. (Even now he didn't know what her name was.) Sabatier was quartered in Touggourt. If they became friends it would make life out here happier. But what had he, Noel, to offer to such a man as Sabatier? Very little; nothing, perhaps. Yet here was Sabatier walking beside him and perhaps intending to spend the night in his camp. Noel had had a wild idea of perhaps passing his night differently, when he had paused near the dancing house after the visit to Bernard and had made a decision. But Destiny had intervened. His liberty had been interfered with. And now he wasn't free—because of Sabatier. Had Madame de Pleunier and Sabatier been sent that night to prevent him from doing something he had decided to do? Ought he to be glad that his evening had been interfered with? He had been desperately irritated by all that had happened. Now suddenly he felt much calmer, tranquil almost. Sabatier away from Madame de Pleunier was no irritant. On the contrary. He felt that all that had distressed him and got on his nerves had come from her and not from Sabatier.

They had walked on for some distance in silence when Sabatier said:

"How exactly did you find our friend Bernard when you saw him to-night?"

"He was in bed, and I thought he looked feverish."

"That was all?"

"He told me it was malaria."

"Ah?"

Noel was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"But it seemed to me that perhaps there was some mystery about his illness—or condition."

"What made you think that?" asked Sabatier, but casually, not as if he were specially curious.

"His servant's manner. And I noticed that twice when he turned in his bed he seemed to take great care in doing so, as if he was afraid the movement might hurt him or do some harm to him."

"H'm!"

Sabatier said nothing more, and Noel thought the conversation was dropped and felt puzzled. There was, there must be, some mystery about the painter's condition. Madame de Pleunier's behaviour in the dancing house had hinted at it. She had shown very definite curiosity about Bernard, and Noel had not forgotten her strange glance at Sabatier when she had said, "I heard there was something the matter"; nor had he forgotten the momentary look of scrutiny on both their faces when he had mentioned that he had just seen Bernard. Madame de Pleunier had not brought up the subject again, but now Sabatier returned to it and evidently had it on his mind. Noel's curiosity was strongly aroused and at last, as Sabatier was still silent, he ventured to say:

"Is there any mystery about Mr. Bernard's illness? Madame de Pleunier seemed rather curious about it, I thought."

"I was just thinking whether I should say any more about it to you," said Sabatier. "I'm not very fond of gossip. And there are many *potins* in a little community, such as we have here. (I'm speaking of the French lot.)"

"Yes?"

"But it was in my mind that, as Bernard let you in when he was keeping others out, he probably had intended to make things a little clearer to *you*. If what has been hinted at is true. He didn't say anything except that he had malaria?"

"No."

"Here in Touggourt some seem to think that an attack has been made upon him."

"An attack!" said Noel, astonished. "Why? I thought he was so much admired by all the people here. He seemed to be friends with everyone. And he's been in this country for so many years."

"Yes. That's true. Still some suggestion that there had been an attack reached the General."

"The Commandant?"

"Yes. And filtered through to his wife. One doesn't know how. That is why you noticed in the dancing house that she and I were interested when you mentioned your visit to Bernard. She had spoken of the rumour to me just before we went there."

"But why should anyone attack Monsieur Bernard? And why, if it were so, should he see me when he was not seeing anyone else? I don't know him at all well. He can't be interested in me."

"Why not? He isn't the only person in Touggourt who is interested in you."

In his modesty Noel was frankly astonished at this remark. But his mind went at once to Madame de Pleunier. Certainly she had seemed to show some feminine interest in him. That remark about his hair! But that anyone else, any man in Touggourt should be at all genuinely concerned about him amazed him. For it seemed to him that the only two Frenchmen he knew besides Bernard were obviously far more remarkable than he was and that they must know it. In Upper Green, among simple, ordinary, strictly conventional English people, possibly he made a small mark. But in Africa, among French people! Was Sabatier, perhaps—could Sabatier be teasing him, playing with him, secretly laughing at him? He was a bit of a tease. Noel had noticed it when they had been with Madame de Pleunier.

"I don't understand this at all," he said, feeling confused and doubtful. "If someone attacked Monsieur Bernard and he was made ill in consequence why should he let *me* into his room rather than those he knew much better? He only told me he had malaria, nothing more. And I believe he was glad when I went."

"It is possible that he meant to say something when he had you admitted and decided against saying it when you were actually with him," said Sabatier slowly, as if thinking something out.

"But what? What could it be?"

"I can't know that, of course. It is only my guess at his reason for seeing you. He had refused to see the General this afternoon on the ground of feeling too unwell to see anyone. Yet he sees you."

"Very strange!" said Noel.

"Madame de Pleunier knew of his refusal. That partly accounted for her manner with you in the dancing house."

"But why should anyone attack Monsieur Bernard? That is what I can't understand. And if it were so why should he pretend he was ill with malaria?"

"Malaria is a fairly safe malady to lay an accusation on in an African settlement, if a man doesn't wish the real reason of his being laid up suddenly to be known."

"If Monsieur Bernard has been attacked by someone do you think he wishes to keep the matter secret?" said Noel.

"Apparently. If it got out there might possibly be a scandal. And Bernard, as he lives in North Africa and is exceedingly well known, both out here and in Paris, might wish to avoid that. There are such abominations as newspapers."

"I got the impression from him that he was completely careless of the opinion of other people."

"Of Arabs? Or of everyone?"

"Oh—yes, I believe it was the Arabs."

"The French out here rather pride themselves on their absolute indifference to *Arab* opinion. I'm not sure that they are always wise in that."

"Don't you, then?" Noel ventured.

"Not always. I'm inclined to feel men of all races as just human beings. For me the breath of life is important whatever the nature of the body in which it is housed—for the time."

When Sabatier said that Noel felt as if he began to understand why he was drawn to him, why he was conscious of a thread of sympathy between them connecting them in spite of fragility.

The conversation had drifted away from the immediate subject of their discussion to something more general. Perhaps that was intentional on Sabatier's part, for he seemed to keep it deliberately general till they came in sight of the camp of two tents which were barely defined in the darkness, though a tiny lit lamp hung in front of Noel's abode.

"Now will you stay?" asked Noel rather anxiously.

"I would. But be frank. Would you rather I didn't?"

"No. Only I should hate you to be uncomfortable and——"

"I can sleep on anything. This burnous is camel's hair. I shouldn't undress. Have you an extra rug you don't always use, or a blanket?"

"Yes."

"Then if you'll wake up the cook——"



"You must share my tent, of course!" exclaimed Noel with almost excited decision. "There's room. I couldn't allow anything else. Amar! Amar!" he called.

After a long moment the cook turned out, looking vague and older than usual, as a man often does who is suddenly waked out of a profound sleep.

"You haven't a watchman?" said Sabatier.

"No. I didn't know it was necessary. I can't speak Arabic. Will you tell Amar to make up something for me on the floor of my tent. You must use the bed, please."

Without contesting this Sabatier spoke authoritatively in fluent Arabic.

"And please tell him we want whisky and soda. Whisky! Whisky!" he added to Amar. "And soda!"

In awkward pantomime he imitated the drawing of a cork sharply out of a bottle.

"And the brazier!" he added. "Please tell him we must have the brazier, Captain Sabatier."

"Sabatier or plain Jacques, please! I'll tell him. But are we going to make a night of it?"

"I don't feel sleepy. My mind's all excited to-night. There are things—things I should like to talk about. You see, I've been nearly always alone for some time."

"We will make a night of it if you wish."

He spoke once more to Amar.

In a few minutes a sort of bed was made up on the ground in Noel's tent with a roll of carpet covered with a sheet for a pillow.

"I sleep there!" said Sabatier decisively. "Or I go back to Touggourt."

Noel had to give in.

The brazier was brought, glowing with gold and with red. Two bottles of soda water were uncorked. The whisky bottle stood between two tumblers. Then pipes were lighted and Amar made off, looking respectful. A French officer sleeping in camp, and one well known throughout the Sahara!

They sat together till deep in the night, the Englishman and the Frenchman. And eventually, minds being in some degree liberated from their prisons by night stillness, consciousness of intimate seclusion, the pipes and the whisky, Sabatier returned to the subject of Bernard and his rather mysterious illness. Evidently it must have been lying on his mind, knowing it had not been permanently dismissed, but must be returned to.

"You are new to this country," he said. "So perhaps you won't mind my giving you a hint or two about your dealings in it. I know it well. My fate keeps me out here. And I love the country. Bernard loves it, too, and knows it as well as any Frenchman can, probably. But he may have made a mistake, if the rumour in Touggourt is well founded."

"That he has been the victim of an attack?" said Noel eagerly, leaning forward with an arm on the deal table by which they were sitting in the lamplight and the lower light of the brazier.

"Yes. Of course you know how intensely jealous the Arabs are about their women, their wives."

"Yes. The veils!"

"But not only about their wives. Bernard may have forgotten that. The rumour in Touggourt is, so Madame de Pleunier told me, that Bernard was knifed at night by an Arab, not on account of a married woman—he

would never have been so foolish as to attempt any dealing with one—but on account of one of the Ouled Nail dancing prostitutes.”

Noel felt a trickle of cold go down his spine. It was succeeded immediately by a feeling of fierce excitement and impetus, of impetus as if he were being violently pushed towards something that was dangerous but perhaps inevitable.

“But are they jealous of *such* women?” he asked. “I mean of women who are—are for everybody who chooses to pay?”

He asked that question as if he were making an enquiry about an impossibility, though he knew only too well how possible such a jealousy was.

“As a rule I should say no. But there are exceptions to every rule, a truism that we all agree to. And then our friend, Bernard, is a Roumi.”

“Would that make a difference?” asked Noel, trying to hide his intense personal interest in what Sabatier was saying under a badly assumed casual manner.

“Yes, it easily might. There is always a great deal of secret enmity towards the Roumi among Arab races. Contempt, too, though we are seldom allowed to be aware of that, and though, as I happen to know, it is possible to be respected by Arabs and even liked. Loved—never, as an Occidental can love a friend. And, going back to our moutons, anything quite exceptional often rouses jealousy that would not be roused by an ordinary happening. Bernard is a painter, and a painter especially of Oriental subjects and scenes.”

“I know.”

“Even the Ouled Nail women, prostitutes though they are, have their tribal rules and usually obey them. There are things they don’t do or only do in exceptional instances. The rumour, according to Madame de Pleunier, goes that Bernard has been painting one of them in the nude and used bribery to bring it about. There is an elderly dancer who is called the *Maréchale* of the Ouled Nails here. Her name is Halima, and she is supposed to be very avaricious. Rumour has it that Bernard bribed her heavily to get him a very young dancer as a model in the nude. Her word is law among the dancers. This girl, it seems, has an Arab lover, or had, a man from the desert, a Bedouin, with all a Bedouin’s prejudices and violent passions. He discovered what was being done and attacked Bernard by night when he was leaving the women’s quarters. He used a knife but only wounded Bernard, who managed to get to his house and has brought no accusation against him or against anyone. In consequence the man has got away into the desert, and—Bernard is laid up with malaria. This is Madame de Pleunier’s account of the matter. It may or may not be accurate. The dancer, by the way, is that girl in the green shawl whom we saw to-night. Madame de Pleunier was determined to have a look at her. You know what curiosity women have about love matters!”

Noel made no comment on this for a moment but sat still by the table, pulling at his brier pipe. Then he said:

“I think the rumour must be true. When I was with Monsieur Bernard this evening I felt there was something more than malaria. In fact, when he told me he had malaria I remember thinking he was telling me a lie. I had no reason—I just felt it. And twice when he turned in the bed it seemed to me there must be something wrong with him that he had to be very careful when making the least movement. But why should he see me when he wouldn’t see the General?”

"The General is Commandant here and might have insisted on an enquiry if he had got at the facts."

"But Monsieur Bernard would have to bring an accusation, wouldn't he?"

"Of course. And apparently he doesn't want to. That is understandable. The French want to keep up their prestige with the natives. But unfortunately we Frenchmen are very much like—shall we say other men or shall we say Arabs?—in certain respects. Under human male skins, whether light or dark, there's a great deal of likeness. Even a Commandant may not escape from it. Nor you, nor I. And that makes some Frenchwomen very sore."

"I wish you would tell me why, in your opinion, Monsieur Bernard had me let in to-night."

"You won't be vexed if I do?"

Noel shook his head.

"May I ask where you met him?"

"It was in the dancing house."

"Was that girl in the green shawl dancing?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps, after what happened to him, if it did happen, he thought of giving you a hint to be careful. You are new out here. He is what you English call an old hand. He may have a friendly feeling towards you. I believe he has. He asked us to meet you so that you might have some company in Touggourt. He may have intended to warn you to be careful about women out here and when he was actually with you have thought better of it."

"I see," said Noel thoughtfully. "I suppose it might have been that."

"It's only my guess. It may be a wrong one."

"I can't see why anyone out here should be at all interested in me," said Noel with *naïveté*.

"Not very much happens here as a rule except routine work. This is an outpost. We are a good way from what in Europe they are kind enough to call civilization. The appearance of a young camping Englishman among us arouses some curiosity. And, if you'll forgive me for saying so, there is something"—he paused—"something unusually fresh about you. You are not at all the ordinary type of hard-bitten Englishman who makes his way to remote regions. I believe you ride and shoot."

"Yes, I do."

"But you don't make the impression of the typical English sportsman. In fact—don't think I'm inquisitive; you practically asked me—there's something rather unusual about you—here. If we met you in England it might not seem so. It might seem different. But *here*!"

"I was told to come out and live like this because of the state of my health."

"Yes. But no one knew that till you explained it."

"And there's something else," murmured Noel.

He felt a sudden inclination to 'let out' to this unusual, this friendly man, who was going presently to sleep on the ground in his tent. If he did how would the small revelation be taken? Would it make an unpleasant difference in their budding intimacy? For a moment he looked at Sabatier with deeply enquiring eyes.

"What is it?" said Sabatier, knocking out his pipe and laying it down on the table.

Noel decided to take the plunge. He might regret it in the morning. He was certainly influenced by the deep night, the remoteness of the camp, and cordiality, and yet not obtrusiveness, of this sympathetic and yet somehow impersonal companion, who he felt must be very 'understanding,' the whisky he had drunk, even by the pipes they had smoked together. He might regret it, but he must do it. This man was surely sincere. He would be sincere with him.

"Nobody here knows it. It isn't important. Somehow I didn't want anyone to know. Because everyone out here seems so different, and one doesn't care to—to stand out from them all in greater loneliness. I'm lonely enough as it is. The fact is, I'm a clergyman; I'm a priest, a Protestant priest."

Sabatier did not look astonished. Noel had expected to see a look of astonishment on his deeply sunburned face. But that face did not change. It looked more interested, more intent. A musing expression came into his deep vivid eyes as they considered his host for a moment in silence. Then he said:

"I understand your reluctance."

"You do! I'm glad."

"There's no doubt that our priests out here, not those who live in communities, like, for instance, the White Fathers of Africa, but those like our Catholic priest, our *aumônier* in Touggourt, must lead solitary lives, however broad-minded—I do like your English expression—they are, or try to pretend they are. There are some devout French soldiers, of course, who hold fast by the Catholic Church. But they are exceptions. The influence of Africa, an enormously strong influence, is certainly not used in the direction of holiness. Of a certain strange mysticism, perhaps, in some cases. Yes. But not of holiness."

"That's it! That's it exactly! You have put my feeling into words," said Noel eagerly, conscious acutely now of the gradual fading of the religious faith that had been his in England and of his almost unconscious consent to the taking of its place by a feeling for nature and for nature's powerful influence that he had not known till he had set foot in Africa. "But I could never pretend to what you call holiness."

Directly he had spoken he felt uncomfortable. This was surely too frank. His companion wouldn't, couldn't, care to be deluged with the narrative of all that had happened to his inner man, and was happening still, since his entry into a new way of life.

"Well," he added rather awkwardly and taking out his watch, "it must be pretty late, I should think. Why, it's two o'clock. Shall we turn in and try to sleep? But please do let me double up on the floor and you——"

"I sleep on the floor or I go back to Touggourt!" said Sabatier with smiling decision. "I shan't undress. I shall sleep as I am. Have no fear for me. I'm an old desert campaigner!"

They got up from the table.

It seemed to Noel that Sabatier must have slept almost immediately, for he lay perfectly still on his improvised bed, and not even the sound of his regular breathing reached Noel's ears. His silence was as of one dead. Noel stayed long awake, his mind at a gallop, his body held, with difficulty,

motionless for fear of disturbing his companion. He fell asleep only towards dawn.

In the morning, after coffee served by a smiling Taha, evidently refreshed by his night out, Sabatier thanked Noel warmly for his hospitality and left him. There was no return to the intimate talk of the night. Sabatier's manner was perfectly natural and unself-conscious, careless, even, and casual. Evidently the revelation of the night had made no bad impression upon him, perhaps, indeed, no impression at all. They parted as friends who had no need to make any fuss about it. And Noel watched with keen regret the upright figure, still enveloped in the camel's-hair burnous, walking swiftly towards the city. The companionship of the night had meant very much to him. He wondered whether it had meant anything to Sabatier.

Noel wondered, too, whether Sabatier's guess at Bernard's reason for admitting him on the previous night was a right one. It must have been made on account of keen observation by Sabatier in the dancing house. Sabatier had evidently been struck by Noel's secret interest in the girl with the green shawl and believed that Bernard had noticed it, too, and had resolved to warn Noel of possible danger to any Roumi who had anything to do with her. But this warning had excited him, had given an impetus to his feeling of desire. There rose in him a sort of schoolboy lust for adventure. If indeed there was danger he was ready to defy it. He thought things over and came to a decision. He could not continue this monotonous life. Everything was changed, and he was changed with it.

After lunch that day and a sleep he called Taha.

"Saddle my horse, Taha!"

"Where you goin', sir?"

"Into Touggourt."

"I comin with you?"

"No. I shan't be long."

Filled with curiosity, Taha went for the horse.

When it came Noel swung into the saddle and without more words rode away. Taha stood looking after him, then joined the cook, and they jabbered together as only Arabs can when they do not sit solemnly in dignified silence.

Before sunset Noël rode into the camp with a book bound in shiny black boards in the pocket of his coat. It was a dictionary of Arab words and phrases which he had unearthed in a small shop kept by a mouldy old Frenchman, who had drifted into the desert from Batna and lived there for many years, picking up a precarious livelihood by selling stationery, newspapers, and a few books, mostly pornographic. The Arabic words and phrases were translated into their French equivalents.

For Noel in his present mood this book was a godsend. The student in him bristled like a dog that scents game. Now he had an aim that suited him. Now he had something to occupy his mind, as riding and shooting occupied his body.

Taha stared with interest when Noel pulled the book out of his pocket.

"What you gettin there, Mister Nowill?"

"I'm going to learn Arabic."

Noel walked into his tent, and Taha led away his horse.

Two days later he called to Taha:

"Come here, Taha!"

"Yes, sir, what you wantin'?"

"I'm studying your language. Come and help me with the pronunciation."

Taha looked very grave and important.

"I very pleased helpin you. I speakin very good Arabic. I speakin English very nice, and you soon speakin Arabic."

"That's it. Come and sit, down beside me."

So the lessons began.

Very soon Noel said to Taha :

"I don't only want to be able to say things. I want to understand things said to me."

"Who you talkin to?" asked Taha with ready suspicion.

"Anyone. Now speak to me slowly the words I say to you."

He consulted the book and presently said in Arabic :

"I hope you are happy here."

"That right?" he asked.

"No, sir. This right!"

Taha corrected him.

"And now," Noel said, "put this into Arabic for me : 'Yes, I am happy. I like being with you. You very nice. I happy—you happy.'"

"Who you sayin all this to?"

"No one in particular. Anyone."

Taha told him.

And the lesson proceeded. More phrases were learned, both for saying to another and for hearing from another.

"But what you learnin all this for?" at last said Taha, whose powers as a pedagogue were obviously becoming exhausted.

"So that I can say things and understand things said to me," said Noel with an attempt at complete nonchalance.

Taha continued to look profoundly suspicious.

Nevertheless, with an almost desperate obstinacy Noel drove on into the colloquial intricacies of the language till Taha struck.

"That 'nough now, Mister Nowill. You gettin tired."

"No, I'm not. Now tell me how you say, 'You are very pretty ; I like you very much.'"

"You sayin that to a man?"

"Of course not!"

"Then why you wantin sayin it?"

"Tell it me slowly. Repeat it several times."

After a pause Taha obeyed. Noel concentrated and memorized it.

"That's enough for to-day. Here! This is for you!"

He handed Taha some paper money.

That night he went to the dancing house, carrying with him the shiny black book. He told Taha and Amar to stay and look after the camp. He would perhaps go to enquire for Monsieur Bernard and pay a visit to Monsieur Sabatier. They were not to worry if he came back late. In fact, he might possibly stay out all night, as Monsieur Sabatier had done in their camp. Monsieur Sabatier might ask him to stay as a return of hospitality. He would, of course, be back in the morning, either for breakfast or soon after. He went off on foot and alone. Taha wanted to come with him. It was dangerous for a Roumi to be out at night beyond the city. But Noel ordered him to remain in the camp. He wasn't afraid. He was well known now, knew the Commandant and had been to the Commandant's house. No one would touch him. Monsieur Bernard and Monsieur Sabatier were his friends. He would take the revolver with which he had winged the hat.

Taha knew what a dead shot he was with the revolver. Not so good with the gun yet. But that would come.

Secretly excited and full of the spirit of adventure, he carried it off with determination. Taha, of course, could do nothing but give in.

He and the cook stood together, watching their master disappearing over the flat in the darkness. When they could see him no longer they retired into their tent. Taha lit his pipe of keef, and they crouched down on their haunches to have one of the interminable talks that the Arabs love.

Noel had not been studying Arabic words and phrases in the true spirit of a student, though when he found himself plunged once again in mental work his old love of informing himself and increasing his knowledge made him care for the thing in itself as well as for the purpose which had sent him hotfoot to Touggourt in search of a key to that difficult language. He wanted to be able to hold some sort of converse with the girl who wore the green shawl. He meant to go now not to the dancing house, but to the Quartier des Femmes, to beard Madame la Maréchale in her dwelling, and somehow to indicate to her what he wanted. He had no intention of visiting Bernard and Sabatier. He wanted to see no Europeans.

It was past nine when he arrived before the entrance to the courtyard and was greeted by the fierce and monotonous music. Always the same music, everlastingly repeated. But it excited every nerve in his body. As he entered the court something seemed to pull at him sharply, as if trying to hold him back. It was so definite that he felt it like a hand laid upon him, although no hand touched him. He ignored it and went on.

He remembered that the Maréchale's chamber was on the left, not far from the entrance, made his way through a group of men near it, stepped up to the lighted doorway, and looked cautiously in.

The Maréchale was there, enthroned on her divan and alone. As on the first evening when Noel had seen her, she was elaborately dressed in bright colours, was heavily painted, wore a crown, plaits of false hair and ostrich feathers, barbaric ornaments and streams of gold coins. She suggested an idol, but her eyes were watchful and keen. On her left was the enormous bed with its painted bed-posts and gaudy covering, above which showed the fat white pillows.

Feeling suddenly doubtful but still determined, Noel bowed as he stood in the doorway. The Maréchale inclined her head in reply, then made a gesture with a painted hand, implying that he might enter. He did so, bowed again, and took a seat on a low stool which was placed by the divan near the coffee table. He then uttered an Arab greeting which he had memorized from the black shiny book. The Maréchale made a reply, which unfortunately he failed to understand. Then she clapped her hands loudly. In a moment a black girl came, merely looked at Noel, instantly understood, went away, and returned almost directly with coffee. Thereupon, eagerly anxious to do the right thing, and braced up to protocol, Noel opened his cigarette case and extended it to the Maréchale. She accepted a cigarette with great dignity. Noel lit it with a match anxiously held and lit one for himself. The black girl withdrew and the audience began.

In dead silence!

Apparently the Maréchale felt no obligation to make a conversational effort. And in those first moments, in spite of his normally excellent memory, Noel forgot the little Arabic that he knew. He was overcome by

the strange situation in which he found himself, immured—so it seemed to him just then—with the mother of African prostitutes, herself a prostitute. What could she be expecting of him? For what reason did she suppose he had sought her out? What proposition was she waiting for on her divan with the huge bed on the left? He looked at her and felt that he shuddered. What a rummage of draperies, of ornaments, of feathers she was, with the mass of false hair and the crown on the top of it! He could not discern what sort of figure she had, whether fat or lean, with small bones or big. She was a painted mystery with keen eyes. Yes, those eyes were keen and were searching his face, and possibly searching his pockets. Seeking for a diversion and aware of those eyes, Noel put a hand inside his coat, extracted some paper money, and extended a note. The Maréchale took it with dignity, as she had taken the cigarette. Suddenly, absurdly, Noel thought of Jonah and the whale. If he offered himself wouldn't the Maréchale swallow him as the whale swallowed Jonah? She looked capable of it. The dreadful idea that she might be thinking he had come there for *her* now nearly paralysed him. But he felt with desperation that he must immediately do, or say, something to disabuse her of the wild fancy if she cherished it under the muddle of draperies. Searching his mind frantically, rummaging about in his memory, he came upon something in Arabic. It was not very lucid, but he brought it forward over his lips. Translated into English it was:

"Very nice girl!"

But directly he had said it fear came upon him. Could the Maréchale think that the sentence applied to her? Again searching his memory, he found something and added quickly and emphatically the adjective 'small.'

"Very nice *small* girl!"

She couldn't make a mistake about this. Though it was difficult, if not impossible, to divine what she would be undraped it was out of the question that she could be small. He made a play with his hands, suggesting, he hoped, grace and youthful charm.

"Small!" he repeated. "Small! Very nice *small* girl!"

The Maréchale raised her large painted eyebrows towards the plaits of false hair, gazed fixedly at Noel, and then again clapped her hands. The black girl reappeared, and the Maréchale, in a rather hoarse voice, suggestive of the keef pipe, uttered words which Noel could not understand. Then the black girl said something in a succulent voice; the Maréchale nodded and the black girl went away.

Could she have gone away to summon the girl in the green shawl? Noel hoped fiercely that it might be so. He was beginning to feel very strung up and impotent as to his Arabic. A great silence now descended in the whitewashed room, only broken by male murmurs from the courtyard.

To do something Noel lifted his coffee cup. As he did this he ventured on a smile in the direction of the Maréchale. She again raised her eyebrows, fixing her keen eyes upon him in a look that seemed to him full of a fearsome comprehension, but no smile came to her saturnine lips. And they continued to sit in complete silence.

How long it lasted, Noel had no idea. But it seemed to him very long. And in it he felt painfully embarrassed, having none of the Oriental's calm indifference to a shared speechlessness between two persons only slightly acquainted with each other. He felt that they ought to be talking. The Maréchale evidently thought otherwise, for she looked impressively indif-



ferent and when she had finished her cigarette seemed so deeply sunk in immobility and detachment that Noel did not dare to offer her another. Her eyes were still fixed upon him, but the searching look had died out of them. Apparently the lady had made up her mind about him and felt no need of further investigation.

At last he heard a sound of movement coming from the doorway, turned his head eagerly, hoping to see the girl in the green shawl, and saw shuffling into the room a rather fat and voluptuous and very small child, or woman, of quite uncertain age—it might be not more than fifteen, he thought, or it might be well over twenty—dressed in bright blue and wearing on its frizzy black hair—it had a very large head—a bright blue-and-red handkerchief with a tassel, from which depended one coin of cold exactly in the centre of a greasy-looking round forehead. This phenomenon presented itself with a submissive gait, but rolling a pair of impudent black eyes that showed a great deal of white, as the eyes of Negresses do. The features, too, were decidedly Negroid, and the skin was nearly, though not quite, black. Pushing past the stool on which Noel was sitting, it—Noel thought of whatever it was as 'it'—stood before the Maréchale in the attitude of a slave waiting for the decision of its fate, with fat hands crossed over its bright blue stomach.

The Maréchale leaned forward on her divan and spoke to Noel. He understood the word 'girl'—'bint'—but nothing else that she said. What she did, however, was painfully comprehensible to him. Stretching out her arms, she made the newcomer turn round towards Noel, and with cruelly expressive hands indicated the creature's points of interest and beauty, like one showing off the points of an animal that was for sale. She stroked the fat cheeks, pushed open the protuberant lips to expose rows of white teeth, indicated the prominent breasts with cupped hands, ran her long fingers down the sides of the figure, pausing eloquently on the hips, and even turned the girl round to give her an apparently admiring slap on her hinder part. Having done all this, she leaned back on the divan and looked expectantly at Noel.

He understood and was outraged. The blood went to his face. He got up from his stool, forgetting protocol, forgetting his former awe of the Maréchale, conscious only of being bitterly disappointed and also insulted. That his taste could be supposed to lie in the direction of the fuzzy-haired, plumped-out negroid anomaly, whose impudently enquiring eyes were now fixed greedily upon him! Losing all his memory of Arabic words, he shook his head violently, exclaimed in a loud voice, "No, no, *no*!" And without making his obeisance to the divan turned sharply on his heel and went out of the room. He thought afterwards that he must have stumbled out down the steps into the court, so angry was he, angry not only with the Maréchale but with himself.

What had just happened seemed to have produced a sudden dazzle of vivid light, in whose illumination he stared at himself and saw his present self with the eyes of the Upper Green clergyman. The clergyman, still in England, seemed for an instant to stare at the African traveller, the thin young man with the too-red cheeks, soberly dressed in clerical black, to gaze on the physically more alert brown young man wrapped against the cold of the African night in the camel's-hair burnous. And the Upper Green clergyman condemned the African traveller, was almost aghast at him.

The Maréchale of the maids had brought this about by the outrageous

crudeness of her behaviour, caused by the outrageous crudeness of her conception of Noel.

He came out into the courtyard, intending to go home at once from this pestilent place and never to set foot in it again. He was just then the victim of a sudden outburst of angry emotion which he probably felt at the moment would last, must last, because it sprang from a source essential in his character. He was, of course, wrong. Such outbursts never last. And his was destined to evaporate almost directly. For just as he drew near to the entrance to the dancing house on his way out of the courtyard the fierce music within stopped abruptly, as usual on a note that to the European ear imperatively demanded another and final note, and the girl in the green shawl, her dancing work for the evening finished, came out on her way home to her room, accompanied by another dancer, and followed by a couple of Spahis wrapped in their red cloaks. She was talking quickly to her companion in a light girlish voice, though it had guttural notes in it, and looked quite different from the impassive siren with the long eyes who had fascinated Noel by her strangeness in the dancing house. Though the Spahis were following, and evidently with intention, she did not seem to be aware of them, but to be entirely taken up by what she was saying. As she came close to Noel she laughed. And her laugh, like her voice, was light and sounded extremely young, the laugh of a child rather than the laugh of a prostitute.

When he saw her Noel's anger and sense of shame died away. He forgot the *Maréchale* with her heavy raised eyebrows, her keen eyes, her horrid describing hands; he forgot the fat negroid child, or woman, was it?

He saw, of course, the two Spahis and realized why they were following the two dancers. He remembered the rumour about Bernard's mysterious illness, which he believed. But again the reckless feeling came upon him which he had felt when Sabatier had talked to him by night in the tent about the Bedouin and their jealousies. The thought of possible danger intensified instead of abating his desires. And he stopped in the way of the dancers and held out his hand to the girl in the green shawl.

She stopped, ceased talking, and stood looking at him as if startled. The other dancer stopped with her. And the two Spahis paused behind them. One of them frowned as he looked at the Roumi. The other merely stared with his birdlike bright eyes.

Searching his memory, Noel found a phrase that he had committed to it, and said carefully and very distinctly and, though he did not realize it, with a slight air of bravado very unlike his normal manner:

"Please—I like you very much!"

When she heard this the startled look disappeared from the girl's face, and a faint submissive smile curved her full lips. Then she glanced sideways at the other dancer, a much older woman with small twinkling and distinctly coquettish eyes, as if calling a witness to her triumph.

Noel still held out his hand. She looked down on it with curiosity, then, after again glancing at her friend, put her hand in it. Her hand was very soft, almost as if it lacked bones. Noel, who was very excited, squeezed it vigorously. She uttered a little chirping cry but did not withdraw it.

"I like you very much!" Noel repeated with an earnestness almost violent.

He was conscious of the smothered irritation of the two Spahis, thought of Bernard's adventure, and actually enjoyed it defiantly. Let them be

angry. Why should these desert men have it all their own way, snatching at pleasure whenever they felt the desire and need of it, while he lived in eternal frustration? He would show them that a Roumi, a dog of a Christian, could get his own way with a woman in spite of their jealousy, in spite of their anger; that a white skin could win over dark skins, even if danger attended the winning. He was enjoying for the first time in his life the feeling that probably danger was near him, waiting on his enterprise.

At that moment a new man seemed to arise in him and thrust his way out into life.

When he repeated that sentence the girl drew away her hand softly and turned to the other dancer. She spoke to her in an almost whispering voice and at great length, while the other stood stolidly listening. One of the Spahis, the taller and older one of the two, muttered something in a very male, very guttural voice to his companion, who replied seriously, frowning, and with a warning expression on his face. The first Spahi looked rebellious, and his companion spoke again, as if reiterating something with greater energy. Then the whispering voice of the girl in the green shawl stopped, and the other dancer turned round and entered into conversation with the two Spahis. While they were talking together, like conspirators, Noel thought—but there he was wrong—the girl in the green shawl pulled gently at his arm and thrust out her girlish chin in the direction of the lighted doorways in the courtyard. It was an invitation. Noel accepted it and followed her with a fast-beating heart.

Noel supposed that she was leading him to her chamber. He knew by now that each of the Ouled Naïl women had a room to herself, all these rooms opening to the court with heavy doors, locked during the absence of the owners with large keys. But he did not know that these keys were deposited with the Maréchale when the owners were at work in the dancing house. So when he found that the girl was making straight for the room he had just left informally, and in a condition of strong indignation, he was afraid that she was going to consult the Maréchale about him and would certainly be met with an angry reply. The Maréchale's heavy dignity had given him the belief that she had a tremendous opinion of her position and importance and had probably felt outraged at his brusque rejection of the fat little Negress and abrupt departure from the presence. He had still everything to learn about the women of the Ouled Naïl tribe.

When they came to the Maréchale's doorway and the girl was about to go in, Noel stopped her and shook his head, trying to convey to her that this wouldn't do at all. He even laid hold of her arm, his fingers closing on her numerous bracelets, and pointed vaguely into the court, hoping that she would understand his desire to go to her room instead of to the room of the Maréchale. Either she had no idea what he meant, which seemed unlikely, or she understood his ignorance of her intention. Anyhow, she took no notice of his attempt to draw her away but quietly, and with gentle decision, removed his hand from her arm and went into the room, leaving him standing outside.

There he waited for a moment uncertainly. He was still feeling very strung up and excited, like a boy caught in the mesh of a wild adventure, which he was enjoying almost fearfully, enticed, semi-determined, yet now half afraid. Was the girl telling the Maréchale, consulting her about him? Was the Maréchale relating the story of his rude behaviour to her? He hadn't really the faintest comprehension of the characters of these women,

of what they would feel at a given moment, of how they would react to the pressure of circumstances. Compared with them, even such a woman as, for instance, Madame de Pleunier seemed like an open book to him. Yet he knew that he understood very little of her. He heard murmurs of unknown words faintly in the Maréchale's room, then distinctly the voice of a man. It seemed familiar to him, yet unfamiliar. It had certainly spoken Arabic. Perhaps one of those Spahis was there, come to protest against his conduct to the mother of prostitutes. Perhaps there would be a row and once more he would be frustrated in the desire which had taken such a hold on him.

He heard the man's voice speak again and had just realized, with a shock, that it was Sabatier's, when the girl returned, took his hand, and with a slight, even delicate pull, like the pull of a well-bred child, drew him after her into the room.

Sabatier, like Noel, wearing a burnous, was sitting with the Maréchale smoking a pipe, while the lady was also smoking : a pipe of keef with a long stem and a very small jet-black bowl. Both of them looked comfortable, rather as cronies may look sitting over a fire on a winter's night, though certainly the Maréchale was rather dressed up for a crony. Although Noel had realized at their first meeting that Sabatier, though a French officer and no doubt a brave and adventurous one, was quite untypical and calmly original, he was astonished to find him so openly at home and at ease in such a place at that hour of the night. He realized later that though obliged to conform to certain discipline like all officers, whatever their army, Sabatier was often a law unto himself and had such a way with him, though it was always a quiet way, that his occasional breaches of etiquette, and even his escapades, were generally overlooked by his superior officers. He was one of those unusual characters so steadfast in their unusualness that they often escape the condemnation even of the conventional. The secret of their freedom from the punishment that overtakes so many eccentrics lies in their courage and unconsciousness of it. Sabatier in the French army in some respects resembled a Pierre Loti in the French navy. He always remained definitely himself, had nothing of the chameleon in him, never took his colour from his human surroundings.

When Noel, embarrassed, found him sitting and smoking companionably with the Maréchale he welcomed Noel with a smile, which had nothing knowing about it. And, much to Noel's surprise, the Maréchale also sketched a sardonic smile instead of showing resentment at his almost violent exit from her presence a short time ago.

"Good evening, Herriot"—he dropped the Mr.—"can I serve you as interpreter? I know you haven't mastered the tongue here yet. The Maréchale told me of the little mistake she made with you this evening. She regrets it. But it was apparently hardly her fault. You dwelt so much on 'small' apparently. And she seems to have misread your pantomime and thought you had Tunisian tastes. She authorizes me to say how sorry she is."

The words seemed satirical, but there was no suggestion of satire in Sabatier's way of saying them or in his look as he said them.

"Oh, it's quite all right!"

Terribly English in this acutely Oriental moment, that was all Noel found to reply. But he added after a moment of silence :

"I know a very few words of Arabic now, but they won't come just when I want them. Please tell the Maréchale——"

He was interrupted by hearing a movement of the girl. He looked round and saw her disappear behind the curtain beyond the great bed. Evidently there must be either an alcove or perhaps another room there.

"Please tell the Maréchale," he continued, "for me that I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

Sabatier spoke at some length to the Maréchale, who replied, smiled again almost graciously, and spread out her hands, the palms turned upward, at the same time leaning forward on the divan. She then addressed several words to Noel.

"What does she say?" he asked.

"She says it was a happy day when she first met you, that she has always loved the English, and that she considers it a great privilege to number you among her friends."

"Very good of her. But why am I here? That girl brought me here."

"Aziza?"

"That her name?"

"Yes. She has come to leave her jewels and to get the key of her room. The Maréchale keeps their jewels at night. These girls don't want to be murdered."

"Good God——" Noel began in horror.

But he was interrupted by the advent of Aziza, no longer bejewelled, who came to him gravely, drew from beneath her shawl a large door key, and showed it to him unself-consciously.

He felt a sensation of relief. It was mingled, however, with a sensation almost of nightmare. The whole situation, everything that was happening to him, seemed suddenly incredible to him. Wasn't he an English clergyman? Hadn't he been a bookish undergraduate at Oxford? Hadn't he lived and been happy in Upper Green near Tunbridge Wells? Hadn't he once been a highly respectable little boy? Yes. He was! He had! Yet now . . . Aziza pulled at his arm. Her long serious eyes were upon him. He must go with her. There was no escape. But he didn't want to escape. That was the stupendous fact.

He gazed at the key that was held up in the dull light of the oil lamp, slightly obscured by the smoke from the two pipes, one of which emitted the acrid perfume of keef.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" he stammered. "Well—good night, Sabatier. Thank you for—I mean please tell her good night for me."

He believed he made a bow to the Maréchale, but he wasn't quite sure. Anyhow, he did something in her direction.

And then he was with Aziza in the night-enfolding courtyard.

After sunrise, when the grey of the desert scene was being gilded by sunbeams, and the smoke was rising steadily in the windless morning by many of the tents in the sands, and the inhabitants of the shadowy oasis were beginning to stir under the crowding palm trees, and the voices of children might already be heard by the runlets of water that stole by at the edge of the paths of brown earth, and the barking of the guard dogs was lessened, the figure of a man became visible walking towards Noel's camp from the direction of the city.

Noel was coming back to his home.

Taha, who had been on the watch for him, hastened to tell Amar, the

cook, and soon the fragrant smell of coffee came from the kitchen tent to welcome the master, and Taha crossed over to lay the table for breakfast.

When he was close to the camp Noel smelled the coffee. Bacon, too, was frying. There would be toast. He smiled as he strode in over the flat earth in the growing warmth of the sun, wrapped in his burnous. Life out here in the desert was good. He did not regret Upper Green. At that moment he regretted nothing. He had a triumphant feeling. It would not last. But for the first time in his life he had it, a whole feeling of triumph, in which the body took part with the rest of him, with that which he had always thought of as not the body. Now and then before coming to Africa he had known a feeling of triumph: when he had passed a stiff examination, when he had learned that he had taken honours at Oxford, once or twice when he had preached a really good sermon and had seen its effect on his hearers. But it had not been like this. Something had been wanting. The whole of him had not been in it.

When he walked into the camp Taha was immediately struck by a change in his master, a something more commanding than usual, a sureness, an alertness, an unaccustomed cheerfulness that amounted almost to gaiety. Taha did not analyse the difference. But he was sharply aware of it.

"Breakfast, Taha! Breakfast quickly! I'm hungry!"

"Yes, sir. Breakfast, him ready."

Taha went to the kitchen tent and murmured things into the listening ears of Amar, who was lifting the frying pan from the burning charcoal.

Noel sat down by the table and opened his burnous.

The walk in the morning air had given him a fierce appetite. The smell of the coffee increased it. He had a lovely animal feeling of greed and contentment, the contentment that is born of eager anticipation. He stretched out his legs under the table, looked towards the kitchen tent, and saw Taha come out with the coffee and toast and bacon.

This was the way to live. Presently he would mount his horse and be off for a ride through the oasis among the glorious trees that made such a wonderful contrast to the yellow sands of the African landscape.

Here was the breakfast!

As he began to eat it Taha stood by.

"You havin nice night, sir?"

"Yes. This is good coffee."

"You sleepin at the Captain's house?"

"I did meet the Captain."

Noel helped himself to bacon and laid a bit of it on a piece of warm toast.

"Him very good man. So you sleepin at his house?"

"It's no business of yours where I slept."

"No, sir."

"That will do. You needn't stay now. I shall ride later this morning. In about two hours' time. I'll wash and rest till then. I'll ride through the oasis alone."

"But the other horse wantin exercise."

"Then exercise him. But I'm riding alone."

"Yes, Mister Nowill."

"And to-morrow we'll go shooting again."

"Yes, sir."

Taha went away, dominated.

What a life! What a wonderful life! Noel asked himself how he had

ever been able to live contentedly, happily even—as he had thought of happiness then—in Upper Green. (Oxford he did not go back to in thought.) He was another man. He must be another man, with these new wants, new needs, with these new powers for joy. It seemed to him that day as if he had been born again—with a difference. Even his state of health seemed suddenly different, as if it had taken a stride forward to a better condition.

He was not conscience-stricken. That might come later, or perhaps not come at all. On the contrary, he had a feeling of now being one with this desert place, and with the men dwelling in it, that he had not had until now. It was as if he were suddenly made free of the life in the belly of the desert. Hitherto he had been apart, unlike, as an outcast is unlike. That was over. He was received.

Thinking of Bernard, thinking of Sabatier, thinking even of what he suspected but did not know about General de Pleunier, he said to himself that morality is greatly a question of place. What would seem shameful in Upper Green did not seem shameful here. A man of the pulpit, a man of the desert, even a man in the desert, could not lead happily similar lives. It was no use, it was even ridiculous, to judge and condemn from a distance. Severe austerity was often the progeny of sheer ignorance. Homekeeping people had not only homely wits but homely consciences.

‘I was, because I did not know,’ Noel said to himself that day. ‘I am, because doors have been opened to me and I have ventured out into Life.’

There was something of the schoolboy in the man of thirty that day. Such men as Bernard and Sabatier, could they have divined exactly what was passing in the Englishman who had strayed among them, must have been amused. If Madame de Pleunier had known she would have been less amused and certainly also less lenient. For with a woman of her type to understand is not always to pardon. And she liked Noel’s hair. And, moreover, she had a sour hatred and contempt for the Ouled Nails.

Two days later, on receiving a note inviting him to dine at the Commandant’s house on the following evening, Noel remembered that with a feeling of discomfort, almost amounting to guilt. Yet what did he owe to Madame de Pleunier? Absolutely nothing. There was no reason why she should exercise any influence over his life. And of course she never would. Nevertheless, the feeling of discomfort, almost amounting to guilt, persisted. But it was not a feeling of moral guilt. He only felt like a man who had committed an error of taste when he thought of Madame de Pleunier and her acute reddish-brown eyes.

She wrote in English :

DEAR MR. HERRIOT,

*I see nothing of you. I would like to talk to you a little more of Sidi Bou Saïd in case you spend the summer in Africa and think to go there. A friend of mine, Sir Thomas Challoner, generally called Sir Tom, has a little house there which he would let for a modest sum in the hot months, though it is never too hot up there by the sea. Thinking of you, I feel the impulse to tell you about it. Do come and dine at eight o’clock to-morrow. No evening dress. Just as you were at Monsieur Bernard’s the other night. He is much better of his malaria, I hear. Malaria comes and goes, as we all know. His seems to have gone—for the time. Meilleurs souvenirs,*

*Yours sincerely,*  
ADELE DE PLEUNIER.

Should he go? A servant was waiting for his reply, a smart-looking thin Arab boy wearing a sort of livery: wide blue trousers, a short jacket, also blue, with silver buttons, and a scarlet band round his slim waist. How could Noel decently refuse? He couldn't. And though partly reluctant, for a reason of which he was fully aware, he was tempted to go because of the words about Sidi Bou Said. For he had made up his mind that he couldn't leave North Africa in the summer. He couldn't go back yet to England, even for a few months. Africa had got too firm a grip on him. And this suggestion of a decent house at Sidi Bou Said was attractive to him. So . . .

The Arab boy waited beside him, looking sharply critical, Noel thought, and inquisitive. Why didn't the Roumi answer? His expression and attitude made Noel uncomfortable, and he hurried into his tent and wrote an acceptance.

In the note there had been no suggestion of company at the dinner, and Noel thought it possible that he would be alone with Madame de Pleunier and her husband. Or perhaps Sabatier would be there too. Madame de Pleunier and he surely knew each other very well. Her occasional irritation with Sabatier seemed to Noel a proof of that. Those we know best sometimes irritate us most.

But Sabatier was not there. He found the De Pleuniers alone, and when he arrived the Commandant explained that after dinner he was obliged to go to the caserne on business. Monsieur 'Erriot must excuse him.

So a *tête-à-tête* with Madame de Pleunier was in prospect.

The Commandant's quarters contained large airy rooms and were furnished with good taste and a certain simplicity which pleased Noel and which he thought suited the region and the profession of his host. There was no clutter of bibelots and ornaments. There was no 'period' furniture suggestive of Paris or a French château. Divans took the place of settees and sofas. Beautiful Oriental carpets and obviously old faded rugs of delicate and harmoniously mingling colours covered the floors. No pictures hung on the walls. But here and there oblongs of Tunisian embroidery were fastened against the background of ivory hue. The salon where Noel was received opened into the dining-room, which was large and square, with an arched ceiling painted white like the walls, and contained an oval dining table made small because they were only three. The greater part of the floor of this room was covered with an exceptionally large Persian carpet that, to Noel's eyes, looked very old. When he first saw it, as they came into dinner, he thought vaguely of Omar Khayyám (which he loved) and then of the *Thousand and One Nights* (which, however, he had never read). It had a great square of very pale uniform colour, a faint greenish yellow, with, in the centre, a sort of large lozenge of black and white and pale blue, and was surrounded by a broad border, containing an intricate pattern in which many colours, greens, reds, yellows, pinks, blues, browns, none vivid, all faded, blended together, and produced a rich but soft and mellow design. Two tall servants waited on them, both Arabs, both very good-looking, both dressed in white with broad red bands round their waists and white turbans on their heads.

That night Noel received a new impression of North Africa and began to realize, with fascination, how marvellous it might be to live in it magnificently instead of simply and even poorly. Not that there was magnificence in the Commandant's quarters. There was not. But there was a subtle air of breeding and of money well spent, not to produce an effect



of ostentation but of quiet harmony and restful beauty. Noel knew very little about interiors and their decoration, but he realized that Madame de Pleunier must be a woman of excellent taste and fine cultivation, whatever her defects. (He was conscious, had always been conscious since he first met her, that she had defects.) That night she was dressed simply in black and wore no ornaments. Noel wondered whether that was because she knew he wouldn't wear evening dress. His understanding of the mysteries of women's attire was practically nil. But in spite of the simplicity of her black gown, he realized that she was beautifully dressed and he felt rather in awe of her.

At dinner conversation flowed easily, not because of Noel's conversational talent, but because both the De Pleuniers had a long habit of the world and were completely devoid of shyness. About the Commandant floated a faint air of indifference, which even persisted when he was talking with the fluency and apparent liveliness characteristic of the well-bred Frenchman. Noel noticed that he never smiled when he was talking. Yet he didn't look grim or morose, and there was in his steady eyes no suggestion of sadness. He asked Noel no questions. Yet he succeeded in conveying a polite interest in Noel's life in the desert and in eliciting from Noel a few facts, though always with the underlying manner of a curious basic indifference.

This didn't seem to Noel to apply specially, or indeed at all, to him personally, but to be completely general, an attitude to life covering apparently almost everything. Noel could imagine that if the Commandant had a life motto it would probably be, 'Nothing matters!' Or perhaps, 'Nothing matters *now*.'

Yet possibly something in his past life had mattered to him very much. Noel found himself wondering about that.

Without any questioning Noel was gradually induced to say something about the steady improvement in his health and about the strange fascination North Africa was exercising upon him, a fascination that seemed steadily to increase as the days went by.

"I even think," he said, turning to Madame de Pleunier, "that I shall give up the idea of visiting England next summer and stay over here, perhaps until summer year."

She smiled in a way that suggested secret intelligence between them. He thought of her letter to him.

"You mustn't stay here, monsieur, after mid-April," said the Commandant in his very clear voice, a 'carrying' voice. "If you do you'll get fever."

"So I've heard. But I might go to the sea. Perhaps in Tunisia."

Madame de Pleunier again smiled, this time approvingly, but said nothing. She was, evidently with intention, allowing her husband to do most of the talking. Perhaps, in spite of his air of indifference, he liked to hear himself talk, and she knew it. She was certainly not a submissive wife. Noel felt that. But she might be at times a good-natured wife.

The Commandant approved of Noel's suggestion. He knew Tunisia intimately and spoke of the *plage* near La Marsa, where the Bey and his family lived, of Sidi Bou Saïd, and of Hammamet, at that time only known to a very few people and completely unspoiled.

"We can give you letters to two or three friends if you want them," he said politely.

Noel thanked him warmly. And they talked of Tunisia and of Tunis. Like the Commandant, Madame de Pleunier knew Tunisia well and was evidently fond of it. She had several friends there. Some in the plain of Carthage, some near by in Tunis, others who had built themselves a villa in the Spanish style at Hammamet. The last, she said, were hermits ; hermits because so happily married.

"It's rather absurd, but they only want each other. Still it's nice to see happiness now and then, isn't it ?"

As she said that she looked steadily at Noel.

"You might spend quite a happy summer at Sidi Bou Said," she added. "It's better than here."

Just then Noel did not think that it could be better. He did not say so, however, but instead asked Madame de Pleunier if she always went to France in the summer.

"I do. But once I spent all the summer at Sidi Bou Said. I was lent a house, or rather an Arab palace, there by some friends of mine who live there, Comte and Comtesse de Varenne. I am very fond of swimming, and there is good bathing there. Perhaps I shall repeat the experience some day. Who knows ? But not at present."

It was all said lightly. And yet somehow there seemed to Noel to be intention behind it. Then they talked of horses and of riding. And both Noel's host and hostess evidently knew a great deal about both. He was not surprised by the Commandant's knowledge, but he was by Madame de Pleunier's. He had not thought of her as a sportswoman. But he now found that she had hunted in the Forest of Rambouillet and had shot ever since she was a girl, having visited in the shooting season at many French châteaux.

This conversation, though he was sure not intentionally, took Noel into a world that was absolutely new to him, in which he was not at home, but which fascinated him as he faintly realized it. What a narrow life he had led in comparison with the life of the De Pleuniers ! How little he knew, how little he had done, in comparison with what they knew and had done ! And he had been satisfied in the narrowness. His new self wondered at his old self while he tried to enter into the talk and to seem at home in it. He was thankful that now he could ride and had begun to shoot a little. The Commandant, no doubt, would smile at his attempts with a shotgun, and Madame de Pleunier was obviously a keen and knowledgeable critic of horsemanship. Still he did ride now and did go out shooting at the Salt Lake with Taha. That was something. He was thankful for these small mercies and made the most of them by trying to talk intelligently about the difficulty of winging the elusive snipe and the peculiarities of Arab horses.

On the whole the dinner passed pleasantly enough for him and, he hoped, also for his host and hostess. He had got on quite well with his French, though Madame de Pleunier nearly always spoke English.

Directly dinner was over the Commandant excused himself and went away to the Cercle des Officiers, and Madame de Pleunier and Noel returned to the salon. At a sign from her one of the tall Arabs drew forward two sliding doors which Noel had not noticed and separated the salon from the room in which they had dined and in which they had taken their coffee.

"Let us sit here on this divan, shall we ?" she said.

As they sat down she added :

"I wanted to tell you about that house at Sidi Bou Saïd. It might suit you for the summer. You can't stay here. If you did you would probably die."

"Oh, I know I must go away. Do tell me, please. It's very kind of you to bother about me."

"Why? I like you!" she said abruptly.

Noel felt that he flushed. He was both pleased and embarrassed.

"Do you really?" he said with *naïveté*.

"Yes. You are so different from Sabatier and Bernard and the other men out here. They are so accustomed to it all, and you are so fresh. There is a weariness of Africa. But you haven't got it—yet."

"But Monsieur Bernard and Captain Sabatier love Africa, don't they?"

"They may. But not as you do. My husband has a great feeling for it too. But surely you must have noticed how it weighs upon him. Africa, even North Africa, alters men terribly. Don't let it alter you."

This turn of the conversation was very unexpected and not entirely to Noel's liking. For he was becoming deeply interested in the transformation he was noticing in himself and could not wish it away.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she added before he could speak.

"But how do you mean?" he asked, startled.

"As if you *wanted* it to alter you and didn't agree with me that it would be a pity if it did."

"How clever you are!" he exclaimed. "How could you know?"

"Then that was it?"

"I had been thinking——" He paused.

"Yes?"

"I had been thinking how much more interesting you all are than I am, and partly—greatly, even, I think—because of your wider lives: Africa and the—and the rest of it. I had been feeling how dull I was and how little I knew. I mean of the big life—what seems the big life to me."

She looked at him fixedly.

"Are we?" she said. "But you must have your own knowledge, though I haven't found out what it is."

"It's chiefly of books," he said evasively, wondering whether Sabatier had revealed to her what had been told to him. "I've studied a great deal."

"Ah?"

She was obviously waiting for more.

"Chiefly the classics. Latin and Greek and so on."

He had nearly added, 'and theology,' but stopped himself just in time. For surely she didn't know or she wouldn't be showing this curiosity.

"I know neither Latin nor Greek. That is, beyond the Latin one has in the Book of the Mass. I'm a Catholic, of course."

"But out here I've nearly dropped books. Except just at night. Then I do some reading."

"Don't you feel lonely *at night*?" she said, dwelling on the last words and still keeping her reddish-brown, very experienced eyes upon him.

Noel thought of his recent night in the courtyard of the Ouled Naïls and began to feel uncomfortable, even anxious. Was it possible that she had heard anything about that? Certainly Sabatier would not have said anything. But Touggourt was small. Her husband was the Commandant. She might have means of finding out all that went on in his command, at

any rate among the Roumi population. He tried to look and seem careless but feared that perhaps he failed.

"No, not specially!" he said. "I'm accustomed to that."

"You are not married then?"

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed with the absurd feeling that an important fact which he had always known about himself must be known to others.

She smiled.

"But of course—how could you know?"

"How could I? But I confess that you don't look like a married man."

Noel wondered whether that was a compliment or the reverse. "Bernard isn't married either. Nor is Sabatier. Among the Roumis there are celibates in the desert."

She said that sarcastically.

"But like one or two of our Catholic priests," she added, "especially in hot climates, they manage to make shift without."

Feeling increasingly uncomfortable and wondering where they were getting to, Noel abruptly changed the conversation.

"Do tell me about that house at Sidi Bou Said, won't you?" he said.

"If it's not too expensive perhaps I might take it for the summer."

Not appearing to notice his *brusquerie*, she described the little house of her friend. It stood on the hill at the extreme left of the white village. The garden ran to the cliff edge and commanded a glorious view of 'the gates of Africa.' Her expression. It roused Noel's imagination. The house was quite small and plain, but nicely, though not luxuriously, furnished by her man friend, an Englishman, who had been Governor of one of the British possessions but had retired under the age limit.

"He was separated from his wife and had to live somewhere, and he chose Sidi Bou Said in a moment of impulse. He has nothing particular to do there. Nor will you have. But you can bathe and dream away sunny hours. Is that enough for you?"

For a moment Noel looked doubtful. She noticed that. When she was with a man instinctively she noticed everything. Then he said quickly:

"Oh, yes! I would find things to do. It's near Tunis, isn't it?"

"Only a short distance away by train through the bitter lake."

"And then it would be only for a few months. Directly it got cool enough I should come back here."

"You really like Touggourt so much?"

He felt he had spoken too enthusiastically, had almost 'given himself away.' There was something now that he increasingly wished to keep Madame de Pleunier ignorant of if possible. He must try to cover his tracks. He had never been crafty and so was no expert in dissimulation, but now he did his best to deceive and said:

"I do. I have reason to. There's a great improvement in my health since I came here. But don't you like Touggourt?"

"There's very little for me to like," she said with a sudden air of lassitude. "The desert is not new to me. There's no society. It's a monotonous life. My husband and I are here from duty, not for our pleasure, like diplomats accredited to some out-of-the-way legation. Such as Bogotá, for instance."

"I don't know where that is."

"Nor do the poor diplomats, as a rule, till they are sent there. Exceptional people like Sabatier, or painters of African scenes like Bernard, find

something to satisfy them here. But I am neither a military Pierre Loti nor a budding Delacroix. I am only a Frenchwoman *dépaysée*, who was certainly once fascinated by North Africa but who has long ago found it out."

"Ah! You were fascinated!" said Noel.

Madame de Pleunier's face, usually under complete control, was suddenly distorted, though only for an instant, by a sort of grimace, which to Noel suggested acute distress, either physical or mental, or perhaps even both. Almost as he marked it it was gone and she looked exactly as usual, handsome in the French way, acute, completely self-possessed, and just a trifle hard, except when she was smiling or talking with the sort of quiet animation that was characteristic of her.

"Well, yes!" she said in a voice even more level and calm than usual, as if to obliterate the memory of the strange spasm that for an instant had altered her. "Most people are at first. With some it lasts and increases—the fascination. With others—*no!*"

Her voice suddenly became almost harsh as she said the last word.

"But I still like Sidi Bou Saïd," she added. "In my friend's beautiful palace looking over the gates of Africa. White peacocks on the terrace above the sea. Plasterwork from Morocco. Lattices of scented woods. Fountains, marbles, the rarest tiles; carpets and rugs of magical hues, magically blended. Arab music at night stealing down from the gallery in the great covered patio. The musicians hidden. The summer sea murmuring far below. The mountain of Zaghouan in the distance beyond the bitter lakes. Tunis la Blanche showing its innumerable lights under the stars to the right of the village. Yes! I still love Sidi Bou Saïd."

"You make me long to go there," he said, surprised by the music of romance that had stolen into her voice and by the distant expression, soft, almost languorous, that had come into her eyes. "Why, it's poetical, your description!"

The customary little smile, suggestive of irony, curled her lips.

"Oh, I'm no poetess, like your Mrs. Browning, or Anna de Noailles. But I know beauty when I see it. And I was rather young when I first saw Sidi Bou Saïd."

There was a momentary pause. Something made Noel feel that he mustn't break it, that she needed just then a moment of silence.

"If you took that house how much would you be ready to pay for it?"

(The eminently practical Frenchwoman suddenly took the place of the dreamy romanticist.)

"But I haven't an idea what I ought to pay," said Noel, taken aback and stammering almost with surprise.

She mentioned a moderate sum.

"Would that be too much?"

"Oh, no. I could afford that. You mean by the month?"

"Of course."

"If I took the house I'd gladly pay that."

"I'll write to Sir Tom and tell him so. I know he wants very much to let his little house to a decent tenant from the beginning of May for six months. At the end of April he begins to long for his club in London."

Noel was beginning to feel that a period in his life was being arranged for him by this decisive lady whom he knew so little. There was surely a sort of eagerness behind what she was doing, a prompting of eagerness. He was being led on to something that he had had no time to think

over, to think out, carefully. Perhaps he ought to resist, to say that he couldn't make his plans for the summer yet, that possibly he might want to go back to England. But he felt unable to make any sort of protest. A spell of inaction came upon him as he sat with her on the divan, an odd feeling that Destiny was at work overruling what he thought of as his free will. But he did wonder for a moment why she was so apparently keen on his renting the house at Sidi Bou Said. And his wonderment prompted him to say :

"You go to Paris this summer ?"

"Yes, till the season there is over, in July. Then I shall visit friends, go from château to château. We have let our place in the country. It's near Tours. Do you know Touraine ?"

"No. I don't know France very well. Do you see Monsieur Bernard in Paris ? He told me he went there every summer."

"I have seen him there. You have heard ?"

"What ?"

"He has got rid of his winter malaria and is out again."

"I didn't know it. I'm glad."

"He was even painting yesterday. But this time *landscape*."

There was unmistakable intention in the emphasis she laid on the last word, and her faintly smiling eyes dwelt on Noel as if inviting him to show that he shared her unspoken knowledge of what had happened to Bernard. Apparently she did not choose to state it, but, nevertheless, wished him to understand it. He did understand it, too thoroughly for his comfort, but he tried to hide his understanding by a poor assumption of indifference as he said :

"I have never seen his pictures. Does he generally paint landscapes ?"

"Sometimes. But he has painted many pictures of different types of African women. Men, too, sometimes. But he seems, from the painter's point of view, specially interested in women. He finds them apparently more picturesque than we European women can claim to be."

"Does he ?"

"Do *you* find them so ?"

"Oh, I shouldn't care to say that !" said Noel quickly.

"You are tactful," she said with, he thought, a faint sneer.

The ironic smile came again to her lips, but a frown wrinkled her forehead.

"Well, shall I write to Sir Tom and tell him you are thinking of perhaps taking his house ?" she said abruptly.

Noel thought he ought to wait before deciding on anything for the summer. It was obvious that he ought to give himself time to think things over. Her subtle pressure made him feel slightly uneasy. But now, having noted her touch of dissatisfaction with him, he was anxious to make amends, to say something that might please her, and he answered :

"Yes, do, if you are kind enough to bother about it. I'll decide definitely a little later perhaps. But I really think I might take it. Sidi Bou Said seems to be a good summer place—if I stay on in Africa."

"Oh—you will ! I know that !" she said with a smiling firmness.

And the frown left her forehead.

A little before eleven o'clock Noel got up from the divan and said good-bye. Madame de Pleunier did not ask him to stay longer, nor did she ask him in words to come again. But her gaze, as she shook hands with him, seemed to ask him something.

"How are you going home?" she said. "On foot?"

"Yes."

"All that way alone?"

"There's nothing to be afraid of. All the people here know me by now. And they know I come to the Commandant's quarters."

"Let me send one of our men to accompany you."

But Noel refused, with a sudden definiteness that was unusual in him and that she certainly noticed. He felt that it perhaps rather surprised her and realized that he should have been more careful. However, she let him go without insisting. She knew how to be with men, though sometimes, her temperament getting the upper hand, she failed to follow her own social—or was it sexual?—precepts.

When Noel left the house he did not go in the direction of the camp. He hesitated for a moment when he was out of sight of the house and then began to walk slowly in the direction of the Avenue de Biskra.

The news that Bernard, now apparently recovered from his mysterious illness and once more at work, was painting landscape, was a relief to Noel's mind but made him more firmly convinced than ever that the rumour spread through Touggourt as to the cause and nature of his illness was true. He had perhaps never seriously doubted it. Now he felt that he knew it. He was excited by the knowledge. At this time, and from the moment when in the Maréchale's room Aziza had drawn the key of her door from under the folds of her bright green shawl and had held it up in the lamplight, he had lived in a state of perpetual excitement that at moments seemed to burn through him like an almost corrosive fluid.

He was doing what a man, seasoned to Africa like Bernard, was afraid of doing. He was imprisoned in an adventure, the first adventure of his life. Never in England had he dreamed of having an adventure or wanted to have one. He had not been one of those eager youths who, on the threshold of life and experience, have a hunger which they are irresistibly driven to satisfy by a spell of what the conventional, or the old unconventional but exhausted, call 'wildness.' Now he wondered at his former self, wondered how it had been able to sleep so deeply in England that he had never suspected its life within him. North Africa had waked it up. And it was like a live thing refreshed by its slumber, made intensely vital by long repose, made even careless by its strength.

But though Noel was not afraid as he suspected Bernard of never being afraid, but was, on the contrary, excited by that possible danger, he was subtly, creepingly, afraid of Madame de Pleunier. He rather liked her. In a curious way she even fascinated him, because she brought such feminine novelty to him and because, when he was with her, he felt all the time that he was learning from her. But for all that, he had some fear of her.

She had told him she liked him, and in a way that seemed intentionally blunt, as if she meant it to make a strong impression upon him. And her eyes had told him that she liked him, perhaps a good deal.

For a man of his age Noel was singularly unconscious that he had any strong physical charm. Extreme youth is often totally unaware of its almost irresistible appeal to some natures. Noel was nearly thirty-one, but in some respects he was much younger than his age. Nevertheless, now Madame de Pleunier was beginning to make him self-conscious. He began to think sometimes of his hair, of his eyes, of his body, and of what she had

called his freshness. Apparently what he had been inclined to condemn in himself, his lack of worldly knowledge, of custom in a wide life, his ignorance of all that was *mondain*, and of what was later called 'smart,' could be attractive to some people. Even to a woman of the world, practised in life, like Madame de Pleunier. And this pleased him. But it also puzzled and made him anxious, because it was so unaccustomed, and he did not know to what it might lead him. At this time he was not afraid of the Bedouin who had apparently physically injured Bernard and had then fled away into the desert. But something in Madame de Pleunier and her attitude to him made him slightly afraid. Not afraid enough, however, to prevent him from going that night straight from his conversation with her to the dancing house of the Ouled Nails. The new fascination made him reckless in act but taught him that he ought to be as cautious as possible in the perpetration of it. He knew that he would only go there under the cloud of the night. Why should she hear of his going, get to know of it? Sabatier knew what he was doing. Bernard, of course, would presently know of it. Possibly even the Commandant might know. But these were men, and he did not believe any of them would speak of their knowledge to Madame de Pleunier. They were not of the tribe of semi-womanly men who love to gossip with women. And Madame de Pleunier could not possibly learn of intimate things from the mouths of Arabs. After his evening alone with her Noel felt convinced that she knew nothing of the sudden development in his life.

On the day after the dinner with the Pleuniers instead of riding or shooting he called Taha and asked him whether he knew where Monsieur Bernard was painting a landscape, as he, Noel, would like to see him again.

Taha did not know but said that when he went to the market in the city to buy for the day he would find out. He did not say try to find out. His belief in himself was too firm for that. He came back from the market towards noon with the news that 'Moosoo Bernard' was painting in the Oued Rhir at some distance from the city and was likely to be still there in the afternoon, as 'him very busy and workin nearly all day.'

"You know his whereabouts?"

"Yes, sir. Him paintin near the Mosque of Great Saint I knowin very well."

"I'll ride there after lunch. You can come with me."

"I comin."

After lunch they mounted their horses, and forty minutes' ride brought them in sight of Bernard, who, with his horse standing in the shadow cast by a wall of mud bricks, was seated on a folding stool before an easel at work on a large canvas. He was painting in oils and wore riding kit with jodhpurs and a sun helmet. At a little distance the mule that had carried his paraphernalia and lunch basket was standing, also in shadow, with an Arab boy in a loose shirt stretched on the warm ground, sleeping beside it. Two tall Bedouins were by the wall a little way from Bernard's horse, which was hobbled, posing as models, one wearing a thin burnous, the other only a white jacket, or tunic, and thin white shorts. Both wore turbans, and both had evidently been chosen by the painter for their striking good looks. As a background there were mud-brick walls of different heights, some low, some lofty and crowned with brushwood, prickly and forbidding; a doorway into darkness; scattered palm trees showing above the walls, and a mosque, not ornate, but rugged and unadorned, with a squat cupola and a



minaret of light-coloured bricks, with two apertures having rounded tops and above them a tiny turret, like a topknot. Near the mosque there was a small native village, but it was hidden. And the place looked solitary and intensely African, not remarkable, not in any way unusual in the desert, but, to Noel's not yet too accustomed eyes, fascinating, because so remote and so utterly un-European. A sunny silence brooded over it, and a deep sense of peace, which affected Noel so much that he pulled up his horse at a little distance before Bernard had seen him, motioned to Taha to do the same and keep silence, and remained for a moment at gaze, steeped in the quiet atmosphere. He had never felt the strange fascination of Northern Africa more keenly than at this moment. So little meaning so much to his spirit. If, or rather when, he went back to Europe, how often he would think of this moment; how often he would long to be where he was now; how strongly he would feel the ache of desire for desert places!

But presently the painter turned his head, having become conscious that someone was watching him, and waved a hand holding a brush covered with pigment.

"You! Come along!" he called.

And they rode up.

Noel apologized for disturbing him.

"I heard you were well again and at work and felt I'd like to congratulate you on your recovery. I won't stay. I just thought I'd take you in my ride."

"Stay for a while. I'll have a brief rest. Get off your horse and let's sit, African-wise, on the ground with our backs against the wall. Taha can look after the horses. I'll have a pipe. I've got something to say to you."

Noel dismounted, and Taha led the horses away to the place where the Arab boy was stretched sleeping beside the mule. Bernard left his canvas without asking Noel's opinion of his unfinished work, and they sat down on the warm ground with the mud wall as back, in the delightfully simple way of the desert. Bernard proceeded to stuff and light his pipe, and there was a moment of silence. But in it Noel was waiting, now touched by a mild anxiety. What was Bernard going to say? He was paler than usual under the eyes. His bearded face looked slightly drawn, as if he had suffered recently. There was a hint of melancholy in his expression. His 'malaria' had evidently pulled him down. But he had moved to the wall easily, and there stood his horse, evidence that he could ride.

"We don't know each other very well," Bernard said after a few puffs of his pipe. "But I hope we like each other, as far as we've got."

"Surely!" said Noel with as much warmth as he could throw into his voice.

"Then may I be frank with you?"

"Of course."

"You're new out here."

"Yes."

"I'm an old hand and yet I've been, as you English say, caught napping. I shouldn't let you know it, if you don't know it already"—he glanced questioningly at Noel—"but for something I've heard about you. Perhaps you can guess what it is?"

"I'd rather you told me, if you care to."

"Then I will. I haven't had malaria, though I tried to make you think

so that evening when you called upon me. I've been suffering from a knife wound."

He stopped. Noel didn't know what to say, so said nothing.

"I suppose you heard that."

"I did hear a rumour."

"Of course. Everything is known in the desert. Even the sands have ears. And no doubt you heard that it was on account of my painting a nude of Aziza, the dancer."

"Yes, I did."

"Ah, you did!"

The way in which Bernard said that showed a sort of faint surprise.

"It seems there's danger round that girl. I thought I ought to let you know it, as I know you see her. Don't think I have any under-motive prompting me to interfere with what you do. No. But for the first time in over twenty years I've been attacked out here and might have been killed but for luck. And all on account of a painting. I had nothing else to do with the girl. You believe that?"

"Of course! Now you've told me."

"Not that it mightn't have come to that. Don't mistake me."

"No."

"But evidently your eyes were open when you—well, your eyes are open. So my warning won't be of any good, I suppose."

"No, it won't," said Noel simply and firmly. "Before I—I had heard that rumour about your illness and I believed it—*before*."

"And it didn't have any effect on you?" said Bernard, now openly showing surprise.

"I wouldn't say that."

"But you went all the same!"

"The effect on me was the opposite of what I suppose you expected," said Noel, still with unusual firmness.

"The opposite! I don't think I understand."

"If anything, it made me go. I might have gone anyhow. I dare say I should. But what I heard about you and the Bedouin—they said it was a Bedouin——"

"Yes, it was."

"—decided me. It's rather difficult to make you understand. But as you've been frank with me I'll be frank with you too."

"Just as you feel!" said Bernard.

He had stopped smoking. His pipe had gone out. Now he lit it again.

"You've had twenty years, or more, of what I should call an adventurous life. I've never had twenty months, twenty weeks, I might say twenty days. I've lived a hard-working student's life among books in England. I lived what some people call a sheltered life till I was ordered out here and decided to come. I was perfectly satisfied with my life, perfectly, and had no ambition for a life of another type till I left England and came out here. I came after health, only that. My health is gradually getting better. I'm certainly much stronger than I was. I'm not cured yet. But I feel I can be cured if I continue to stay in North Africa. And I mean to stay till next summer year."

"Not here! You can't stay here all the time."

"No. I shall leave some time in April. But I mean to come back."

"Don't come before the end of October."

"That will be it, I suppose."

"You believe this place is good for your health?"

"Yes. I'm much stronger here than I was. And I think it's that which has bred in me a longing for adventure. In England I never had any feelings of that kind. I should think I was the least adventurous undergrad Oxford has ever seen. Here I'm another man, and when I heard that a Bedouin had attacked and knifed you because of that girl it impelled me towards her."

"I think perhaps you'd have gone to her in any case," said Bernard rather drily.

"I might have. But what I was told had happened to you decided me."

"Strange!" observed Bernard.

"The thought of possible danger excited me."

"Did rumour say that the Bedouin fellow had bolted off into the desert after knifing me?"

"Yes. But still there seemed a spice of danger."

"And just not too much, perhaps."

For a moment Noel felt deflated and almost angry.

"I can't pretend that I'm anxious to be murdered," he said.

"But—oh, you can't understand! Perhaps nobody could. But it's true, what I've said, absolutely true."

"I believe you. Just enough danger—and not too much. Well, I've warned you, and uselessly. It comes too late."

He looked, musingly almost, at Noel, rather like an elderly man considering an ardent lad with a curiosity which was incomplete because of a surge of old memories, but which, nevertheless, was there because of those memories.

Noel said nothing to this. And after a brief silence Bernard said:

"May I ask you a direct question?"

"Yes."

"Was it Madame de Pleunier who told you of that rumour about me?"

"No," said Noel rather uncomfortably. "She didn't tell me."

As he said this he saw by the look in Bernard's large eyes that he wasn't believed.

"I'm saying the truth. She did *not* tell me you had been attacked, but I think she suspected it. She did. But she didn't tell me."

"A woman as clever as Madame de Pleunier can find ways of telling a thing without saying it."

Noel made no comment on this.

"Of course she knows what has happened to me. And the Commandant knows it, too, though I've never told him. I've stuck to it that I was ill with malaria. I didn't call in the military doctor, but an old Russian who drifted out here—God knows why—years ago and makes a living here somehow. He's incapable of giving a patient away and he lives with the simplicity of a saint. And the Commandant is too much of a gentleman to give me the lie when I tell him I've had malaria. He has to respect my lie."

Bernard smiled again.

"There are a good many insincerities in the code of what is called a great gentleman. But I like the Commandant."

"So do I. But I don't exactly know why."

"His great gentlemanliness makes one feel safe with him."

"Perhaps that's it."

"And even Madame de Pleunier didn't tell you?"

"No. She only hinted. She always called it malaria, but I could see she didn't believe it."

"Anyhow I've recovered—sufficiently. And the Bedouin fellow has got away into the desert. And as they say in politics, 'the incident is closed.' But I advise you, in spite of this sudden love of adventure you spoke of, to be careful. I need say no more."

He began to knock out his pipe. Noel felt that he wanted to get back to his work.

"I ought to go. I've interrupted your work."

"In a minute. Let's sit here for another minute."

They sat in silence till Noel said:

"I shall never forget this place."

"Ah! You like it too? Just an ordinary little bit of North Africa—nothing much. A few brown walls, a few palms looking over them, an old mosque tower, silence, the blue sky, and the light. One leaves them. I go to France every year. But one has to get back to them. The simplicity of it all. That boy in his shirt lying asleep by the mule. The desert all round one. When I'm in Paris I think of it all, and I have to get back, to throw off the yoke of cities, to kick away what is called civilization."

"Madame de Pleunier doesn't feel as you do."

Bernard suddenly looked very alert.

"No? Did she tell you so?"

"Yes. She said she had found North Africa out."

"She used that expression, did she?"

"Yes. And she said that at first she had been fascinated by this country, but that the fascination hadn't lasted."

Bernard looked at Noel and then said:

"You haven't had very much experience of women, have you?" Noel reddened as he answered:

"Not very much."

"If you had you probably have noticed that women are usually more personal about everything than we are. We generalize more than they do. They see things not as what they essentially are but as what they are, or seem to be, in connection with themselves and their own experiences. I have known a woman, who for years had adored Paris, to conceive a permanent hatred for Paris, simply because a boy she had fallen desperately in love with in the country and persuaded to come to Paris because she lived there was carried completely away by the intoxication of Paris and ran after other women there. She hated Paris as one hates a person who has wronged one. That is woman. So perhaps Madame de Pleunier and North Africa."

Noel remembered the grimace of tragic distress that had for an instant distorted Madame de Pleunier's face when he had said to her:

"Ah! You were fascinated!"

"You think she has a personal reason for hating it?" he ventured.

"Of course!" said Bernard.

Then he got up, but rather carefully, from the wall by which they were sitting. Noel got up too.

"I'll be off now," he said. "May I just have a real look at what you are doing?"

"Yes."

Noel went to stand in front of the easel and stayed there for two or three minutes in silence. He knew very little about painting, though he had an earnest reverence and admiration for the great pictures he had seen from time to time in the London and Paris galleries. He saw now on Bernard's canvas the beginning of a faithful reproduction of the simple African scene, which meant so much to him that he knew he would never forget it. But Bernard seemed to have mysteriously added something to it. His picture was less than the scene, as art is less than nature, man being inevitably less than the Creator. And yet it seemed also to Noel to be more than the scene, though why he could not have said. It roused his imagination even more than the landscape did, made him long even more than the landscape for the unattainable. Silence and peace were there, concentrated, bounded, shut in, and because of that, because of the limits the canvas imposed, they seemed actually deepened.

When he spoke Noel, rather falteringly perhaps, tried to say something of what he felt.

"I'm glad you feel it like that," said Bernard. "I, too, have had the same kind of feeling sometimes when I've looked at a painting. I saw one in Paris by Utrillo. It was merely an empty street in snow, the length of a street in a French country town, with a rather ugly church in the foreground. Evening coming on over the snow. No one there. Not a soul. I felt snow and winter evening while I looked at it in a peculiarly intimate way. Not quite as I should have felt them in nature. The addition of man, the painting man and his feeling about it all. Mysterious!"

They stood again in silence for a minute or two. Then Noel said good-bye and called for his horse.

Bernard's warning about Aziza—"There's danger round that girl"—stayed in Noel's mind, but he knew it would not have any influence on his conduct. He had set out deliberately on a path that he meant to follow farther. But he felt grateful to the painter for having taken the trouble to speak to him so frankly, for having told him what apparently he had told to no one else. Others knew it evidently, but not from Bernard's lips. It was a friendly act of Bernard's, and Noel was convinced that there was no ulterior motive behind it. Bernard had painted Aziza but had not been one of her lovers. And from now on Noel felt sure that he meant to avoid her. Apparently he had had enough of the knife, though Noel could not think of him as a coward. Had he cared for the girl genuinely, even in a merely sensual way, he might have defied the Bedouin even after what had happened. But evidently his interest in her had been mainly a painter's interest. Noel wondered how far Bernard's work on the picture had progressed and what had become of it after the Bedouin's attack. Noel longed to see it. His jealousy of Bernard had almost, though not quite, died down. In any case, it did not reach forward into the future. It was only retrospective and no longer troubled him seriously. Bernard's ardour as a painter was evidently less, in this instance, than his caution as a man. Perhaps his picture, no doubt unfinished, had not been a success. Perhaps it had not pleased him enough to overcome the force of his conviction of danger. Having the student's, but not the artist's, temperament, Noel was unable to imagine

exactly how far the love of his art was likely to carry the artist, though now, having seen some work of Bernard's, he realized that Bernard had genuine talent from the evidence of his own eyes. Thinking over the whole matter of Bernard's relation to Aziza and his apparent abandonment of it because of the Bedouin, Noel felt a certain confusion of mind about Bernard.

And his mind, partly because of that, began to be busy about the Bedouin, that mysterious lover and criminal who had disappeared into the desert.

What manner of man was he? And what had been Aziza's feeling for him? One knew something at least of the fellow's feeling for her from what he had done because of her. But Aziza, to Noel, was an enigma.

He remembered that in England he had once heard of a love affair and marriage that had seemed to him at that time preposterous. An English fellow up at Oxford who knew no modern language, though he was a fairly good classic, had fallen in love, while making a short journey on the Continent, with a Hungarian girl who knew not a word of English but who had just arrived in Paris in order to study French. They had married in a hurry without being able to have any connected conversation together, or indeed any real conversation at all without the miserable aid of dictionaries. That was all Noel knew of them. But he remembered how at the time he had thought the whole thing preposterous and had been quite unable to understand it.

Now he did understand it. For Aziza was a sealed book to him, in spite of what had happened between them and what he, violently but incomprehensibly, felt for her. They could not yet express themselves to each other in words. They could have no real conversation together, although Noel's brief study of Arabic with Taha's help had given him the power to say a few sentences to her which, so far, had only elicited from her soft girlish giggles. These giggles fascinated Noel, as everything in Aziza fascinated him, but they did not make him understand her character or bring him into any real connection with her mind.

He remembered now that he had thought of the Oxford student who had married the Hungarian maiden without being able to talk with her as crazy. He remembered saying to a friend, 'How can people do such things? It's like madness.' Yet what was he doing now? Yet he wasn't mad. He felt perfectly sane, but a sane man driven, a sane man under a spell. He was sane, but he was absolutely fascinated, and he had never been fascinated before, had never known what fascination meant. In some books—he had read very few novels, but he had read some that were famous and were considered classics—he had read of fascination. It had been dwelt upon and described by the writers. But he had never understood it and had thought the descriptions exaggerated. Of course he knew his Homer. But he had never realized how Helen could have meant so much to men that the siege of Troy should have been undertaken on behalf of her. All that was legend. He loved it for the wonderful art of the narrator. But only part of his mind had reacted to it, never the whole of him.

Now things had come to such a pass with him that he was fascinated even by his total incomprehension of Aziza. He had always felt with the healthy and unconventional English girls he had met that he understood them, at any rate quite as well as he needed or wished to. He had never been specially conscious of the mystery of woman. But now he felt it, and it was an African mystery. And what the Bedouin had done to Bernard had deepened his sense of it. The Bedouin's crime had, to Noel, given a

peculiar value to Aziza. She had been worth that much to one of those fierce desert men. There was romance in the consciousness of it.

When he was again in the camp Noel sat down to his tea, his mind crowded with thoughts.

Bernard surely knew something about Madame de Pleunier that he, Noel, did not know, why she had this strangely bitter and personal feeling about North Africa and yet spent so much of her time in it. Noel believed that Sabatier had the same knowledge. Why was it? What could be the reason? Perhaps she lived so much in North Africa and now in a place that apparently she hated, Touggourt, from a sense of wifely duty. The Commandant's profession, the position he had attained to in it, obliged him to be there, prisoner of his *métier*. She might think herself obliged to keep him company in it. But Noel, in spite of his ignorance about women, could not feel that Madame de Pleunier was a dutiful woman, or one who would sacrifice herself for a man merely because he was her husband. There must surely be some other reason for that, a North African reason. Noel knew that he wouldn't forget the answer Bernard had given him when he had asked whether Madame de Pleunier had a personal reason for hating North Africa, as that woman who had loved the boy had come to hate Paris.

"Of course!" Bernard had said, almost impatiently, as if the question were childish and so ridiculous and unnecessary.

Had North Africa taken someone she loved away from her? The Commandant, perhaps? Or someone else?

Noel thought of Sabatier. He could not understand exactly what relation Sabatier stood in to Madame de Pleunier. But they were certainly intimates.

Noel had strayed into a difficult world, full of secret things and relationships that he couldn't fully understand. He felt that he was beginning to be suspicious and doubtful of the bona fides of those whom he met. Yet several were, or seemed to be, kind and well-meaning towards him. Bernard, for instance! Bernard had taken the trouble to warn him against what might prove to be danger; Sabatier had shown an inclination for friendship with him. The Commandant had been polite and hospitable. And Madame de Pleunier?

Well, she had shown almost more than a casual friendly interest in his life. That pressing suggestion about the house of the mysterious Sir Tom in Sidi Bou Saïd! But that might have been caused by a kind-hearted desire to do a good turn to an absent friend. Sir Tom was anxious to let his house. Madame de Pleunier knew that and was ready to help him to let it. Just a good-natured action that cost her nothing. She could not be personally interested in the matter. She went off to Paris and French châteaux in the summer. She would not be at Sidi Bou Saïd. She had said so. Or would she? Noel remembered now that one summer, at any rate, she had been there and had occupied the Arabian palace of her friends, whose names he had forgotten.

He began to wonder, with a beginning of something like excitement, about Madame de Pleunier. Should he decide to take the house of Sir Tom and spend his summer in Sidi Bou Saïd? He had not promised to take it, had not given his word. There was time to draw back. But he now began to have a fatalistic feeling, like one drawn irresistibly by a current. Perhaps all that was happening to him out here in North Africa was meant to happen, had been ordained. Perhaps free will was only an invention of the

mind of man. At that moment he found obscure comfort in that thought. For it seemed to excuse the strange weakening within him of the religious sense which had been his in England. Deprived of the outward forms of the Protestant religion, the inward affection for and desire of them had diminished within him and now had died out of him. When Sunday came round he had no wish to go to church. Christmas had passed him by almost unobserved. The new way of life had completely ousted the old. It really seemed as if North Africa had laid upon him an invisible, impalpable hand and abolished the austere student, the priest who had been happy in the pulpit, telling his congregation of strictly conventional English people the way in which they should walk. The gates had been opened for him into a wider world. The clergyman's clothes lay locked away in his trunk. He looked down at his riding kit. He glanced at the burnous of camel's hair which he threw over his shoulders when he went at night to the courtyard of the Ouled Nâils. And he was amazed at what he had been.

But—and that was surely strange—he was not amazed at the man he now was. For he seemed the natural man.

One morning when Noel, after spending the night in Aziza's room, was preparing to start on a ride through the oasis with Taha, Madame de Pleunier's page boy, Hassan, appeared in the camp, carrying a note from his mistress. Noel opened it and read :

DEAR FRIEND,

*I have communicated with Sir Tom about the Sidi Bou Saïd project for the summertime, and he is anxious to settle the matter. We are now in New Year, and at latest you ought to be gone from here by the middle of April if you want to escape fever. Sir Tom wants to be off to London before the beginning of May. On my recommendation he would be glad to have you as his tenant for the six months from May the first to the end of October, at the price I mentioned to you and you thought not too dear. Have you come to any definite decision, and can you take my word for the suitability and charm of the little house, and the beauty and healthy climate of Sidi Bou Saïd ? I don't, of course, want to press you. I am only interested at all because of my friendship for Sir Tom and my wish to do him what you English call a good turn. Perhaps you could let me know what you think. I expect to leave here for Paris for the summer in April. When shall we have another meeting ? You would find me at home next Thursday at tea-time after five, if you are in this direction and you don't mind going home in the dark. I could order a sand cart and a trustworthy Arab—if indeed any Arab is trustworthy—to see you home.*

*Yours ever,*

ADÈLE DE PLEUNIER.

Noel read this note carefully twice and pondered over it, while Hassan, in his smart wide blue trousers, short jacket, red cummerbund and turban, stood with Taha and Amar near the servants' tent, waiting for a reply.

Well, the reply must be written. But Noel wanted time to think over what he would do. There were several things in the note which gave him matter for thought. He could not decide about Sir Tom's house in a moment.

And he sat down at his table and wrote briefly, thanking Madame de Pleunier for her kind interest and saying he would come on Thursday and



give her a definite answer then. He gave this to Hassan with a small gift of money and watched him go away towards the city. Then he countermanded the horses. The wish to ride had suddenly left him. He wanted to be alone to think over the note. He would take a stroll by himself and carry it with him. And he took his way to the oasis.

The weather seemed to be getting slightly warmer with the turn of the year, and that morning he was specially conscious of the delicious atmosphere in which he was enveloped as he strolled slowly onward between the brown walls, above which rose the massy green of the luxuriant and dense vegetation presided over by the feathery date palms. The brown earth was delicately warm to his hand as he bent down and touched it, and he wished he were going barefooted.

Presently he came to a place where one of the gently flowing streams that threaded their ways through this paradise spread out beyond a low dam into a rather large shallow pool, on either side of which narrow paths wound away into the darkness cast by the trees. Here the native women came at certain hours to wash their household linen. That day, by chance, there was no one. Even the playing children who were usually there, laughing and bathing, had gone elsewhere, perhaps into the cloistered shade of the secret gardens. Near the water lay the ruffled trunk of a fallen palm tree, the top of which had been sawn off, leaving a yellow wound. Noel sat down on this trunk, lit a cigarette, and gave his mind up to consideration of the note which he had brought with him and of what he should do when the fierce Saharan heat of the desert drove him away from Touggourt and from Aziza. He was beginning to dread that departure. But he knew that he could not stay.

He re-read Madame de Pleunier's note carefully. In the camp he had received from it an impression of pressure and even of more than that, of a subtle desire, not certainly expressed, yet somehow indicated, to dominate.

Only January, yet—'We are now in New Year . . . at latest you ought to be gone from here by the middle of April. . . . On my recommendation he'—Sir Tom—'would be glad to have you as his tenant for six months. . . . Have you come to any definite decision? . . . I don't want, of course, to press you'—not true—'I am only interested at all because of my friendship for Sir Tom and my wish to do him . . . a good turn.' Surely not true. 'Perhaps you can let me know what you think. I expect to leave here for Paris for the summer in April. When shall we have another meeting?'

Why was Madame de Pleunier so anxious that he should spend all his summer in Sidi Bou Saïd? Why should she care where he spent it as she was going to be in Paris? If she was going to be in Paris!

Noel's English freshness was perhaps beginning to wear thin in the desert; perhaps his *naïveté* was departing. Anyhow, as he considered this letter, its tone roused in him a furtive suspicion, which both excited him and waked in him a spirit of contradiction and of resistance. Really, he rather wanted to go for the summer to Sidi Bou Saïd. For it was evidently a charming place, and the climate must be good, as Madame de Pleunier had once spent a whole summer there. On the other hand, he didn't want to be made to go there by a woman.

The silence was deep by the pool, except for the soft glassy murmur of the water slipping over the weir. What a paradise the oasis was before the fierce heats came with their burning breath!

'How can I ever leave Africa?' Noel said to himself. 'How can I ever return to the humdrum of English life?'

Already he was beginning to dread the arrival of April, the month, for him, of departure, of separation from Aziza for many long months. Even Sidi Bou Saïd, if he went there, would be a place of exile for him, though England would be far worse.

Could he take Aziza with him to Sidi Bou Saïd or get her to come there and stay for the summer; not in the house of Sir Tom, of course, but somewhere in the village? Or even somewhere in Tunis, where he could visit her?

Tunis! A city! Where she could be hidden, where she could live in some secret room for him alone.

Directly this thought of Aziza in Tunis came into his mind, all Noel's doubts about Sidi Bou Saïd and the pressure upon him of Madame de Pleunier vanished. The future seemed suddenly to clear for him, like a landscape half hidden in mist clears when the mist is dispersed. His heart bounded with hope. An added life seemed to thrill through his whole body. He thought of the summer with ecstasy. Aziza in Tunis for him alone, released from the Quartier des Femmes, his possession. Each day he would visit her. By then he would have learned a great deal of Arabic and would be able to talk to her freely. He was quick at learning. In three months, with the incentive he had, he felt sure he could speak Arabic fluently. And then the embarrassment he felt in their enforced silences, or when she spoke to him and he could not completely understand her, would be a thing of the past. He re-read, for the second time, Madame de Pleunier's note. But he now saw the words in it with different eyes. She could not make him go. If he went to Sidi Bou Saïd he would go because he eagerly wanted to. He would go because Aziza would be near him in Tunis. Never mind what Madame de Pleunier's intentions were, why she was so interested, or seemed to be, in the matter of his summer! She would be in Paris, out of the way. In his mind just then Noel packed her off to Paris and left her there till the winter. He trampled down, as he sat there, his dawning suspicions about her. He would no longer doubt her bona fides. She had only wished, was only wishing, to do a good turn to Sir Tom. He deliberately deceived himself, went against his own intuition, because of his joy in his new idea, his conception of a new possibility. And when finally he got up from the palm trunk to return to the camp and looked round him in a silent farewell to the pool, the weir, the open space with the small paths leading away from it into the depths of the overgrown oasis, he said to himself:

'I'm in the earthly Paradise. Surely nothing will go wrong for me while I stay on in Africa.'

And he went on his way, rejoicing.

But when he was back in the camp the difficulties attaching to his scheme presented themselves to him. Would it be possible, even by bribery, to persuade Aziza to do what he wished, to abandon her habitual way of life, to leave her '*camarades*,' to go into a foreign land—Tunisia instead of Algeria—and to give herself up, even for a time, entirely to a Roumi? How could he set about trying to persuade her when he knew so little Arabic? He supposed there were rules to which the dancers submitted, but he did not know what they were. The Maréchale seemed all-important among them. He knew only that, and that they were visited periodically by a doctor, or paid visits to him. He felt he must inform himself before

making the bizarre attempt he was meditating. He could only do that, he thought, by breaking through his natural reserve and applying either to Bernard or to Sabatier. Either of them probably would know what he felt he must know before going further with this, to him, so important matter.

He decided to speak to Sabatier. And he sent Taha at once to the city with a note asking if Sabatier would dine in camp with him any night before Thursday. It was now Monday.

Taha came back with a reply. No, Sabatier would not accept Noel's invitation because he wished Noel first to come and dine with him. Would he come on the following night to the rooms Sabatier occupied beyond the great mosque not far from the market-place?

Noel accepted this invitation without hesitation and, indeed, with real pleasure, and on the following evening, accompanied by Taha to show him where Sabatier lived, presented himself about eight o'clock at an Arab house in the native quarter, not a hundred yards from the mosque which was one of the chief features of Touggourt. At the big door of palmwood which closed in the entrance he let Taha go. It was understood between them that Taha might spend the night in the city. No arrangement had been made about what Noel would do.

"You must be back by breakfast time," said Noel on bidding him good night.

"Yes, sir," said Taha with an understanding smile which irritated Noel but which he could not openly resent.

As Taha strolled away Noel knocked on the door. But immediately he had done so he called Taha back.

"As Monsieur Sabatier stayed with me in the camp when he came there to see me, I shall probably sleep here. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. I quite understandin."

And Taha went away, smiling.

Noel knocked again. This time the door was answered by an Arab in white with a green turban, which showed that he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca and was 'Hadji.' He was not young and looked weather-beaten and severe. He had a sharply curved nose and a thin black beard and moustache. He greeted Noel deferentially, but with gravity, and led him through a small interior court, which was empty, and up a narrow tiled staircase and a landing, also tiled, from which three doors gave into rooms looking out on to an alley at the back of the building. Opening one of them, he showed Noel into a long and narrow chamber, almost startlingly clean, blue and chalk white in colour, and furnished as merely a dining-room. There was a long white table on a floor of white tiles in the exact centre, already laid for the meal, with a white cloth, old silver, and shining crystal. Two blue chairs with wooden arms stood opposite to each other in the middle of the table's length. In front of each was laid an old faded Kairoquan rug. Faintly from the alley outside through the narrow barred windows rose a sound of murmuring Arab voices coming up from the dark. There were no flowers on the table. But on a projecting traylike arrangement made of tiles, fastened into the wall at the far end of the room, stood two carafes holding red and white wine, with between them a bowl of enormous oranges. To Noel's eyes the room looked austere and yet somehow enticing.

The servant went softly away, and for a moment Noel was alone, companioned only by the faint nasal sounds from without.

There were no curtains at the windows. But there were blue shutters

folded back against the white walls. An oil lamp with a blue shade, the colour of the shutters, hung above the table and threw on it a not-strong light.

Noel remained standing. Knowing why he had come and what he meant presently to say to Sabatier, he began to feel shy. But he was resolved to be perfectly frank. What else could he be if he was to get the information he needed? Sabatier knew of his association with Aziza, so no confession of that was necessary. And Noel was well aware by this time that nothing which occurred in the desert was likely to surprise or shock Sabatier, long broken to desert life, its strange freedom and carelessness of European conventionalities. With Sabatier he could say out what was in his heart and not fear condemnation. He knew that, yet the long habit of English reserve and his supremely respectable past still held him in the grip of an almost paralysing shyness when Sabatier came into the room, excusing himself for not being there when Noel arrived.

To Noel's surprise he was dressed not in European but in Arab costume and wore flung over his broad shoulders a thin white burnous and on his head a white turban, which gave dignity and expressiveness to his face and made him look very handsome. His bright blue eyes, below the beautifully folded turban, seemed to Noel more piercing even than usual, yet nevertheless remote, as if habituated to gazing out over great spaces.

After shaking hands they sat down at once on opposite sides of the narrow long table, and the servant who had opened the door to Noel brought in the first course of the dinner, a delicious soup made of lentils.

"Will you drink red wine or white?" asked Sabatier.

Noel decided for red and was given some good bordeaux, not warmed, however. Evidently Sabatier didn't trouble about these little niceties in the desert. Sabatier drank nothing. He told Noel that when he ate alone in his rooms he seldom drank with his meals.

"I don't care about wine and I'm seldom thirsty. But sometimes I drink with my comrades. They expect it, and out of good fellowship I give in to their expectation. One must occasionally be accommodating, however tiresome and boring it is. But do you care for opinion?"

After a moment of hesitation Noel answered:

"I'm afraid I do—very much."

"I thought so," said Sabatier. "How fortunate for you that you are not in the army."

"Why—exactly?"

"Most soldiers think the opinion their comrades have of them is about the most important thing in the world."

"Do you?"

"No. But in the small matters I try to make myself agreeable. It's perhaps rather a question of good manners with me than of anything else. I shouldn't sit down to dinner with another soldier dressed like this, even off duty. But I knew *you* wouldn't mind."

"Of course not," said Noel.

Sabatier didn't tell him why he wore Arab dress. Apparently he considered that no explanation was necessary.

The soup was followed by a dish of mutton, cooked with olives and onions and deliciously soft and succulent. Then came some wild duck. Sabatier had been out shooting near the salt marshes. (Noel learned later, but not from him, that he was a crack shot as well as, like Bernard, a first-

rate horseman.) The dinner ended with a sweet containing almonds and honey mingled in a coating of exquisitely light and flaky pastry, and with the enormous oranges which Noel had noticed when he came into the room.

"I decided to spare you the invariable couscous," said Sabatier as they got up from the table. "Strangers to the desert usually get sick of it as the Israelites got sick of manna. But I never weary of it if it's properly prepared. What's generally called monotony in Europe has even a charm for some of us who have passed many years mainly in desert places. It comes to have a mysterious fascination which we could never explain."

"I can understand that," exclaimed Noel.

"Ah!" said Sabatier.

He paused, then he said:

"You are getting on."

He got up, opened the dining-room door, and led Noel into an adjoining room, larger than the first and entirely different. It was not austere but had a luxurious atmosphere and was much warmer than the dining-room. This warmth came from a very large brazier, red-hot, which stood on the floor in an angle. A faint but pervading perfume made the room very personal. It smelled to Noel like white lilac, and he even looked about for lilac. But of course there was none, and he felt foolish. How could there be lilac out here? Sabatier, when he spoke of this, told Noel that the room was scented with essence of white lilac prepared by a friend of his, famous in Tunis, a perfumer by profession, descendant of a dynasty of perfumers.

"He can be found in the alley of perfumes in the *souks* of Tunis. An interesting fellow. His illuminated *boutique*, full of glasswork and lightly coloured woodwork almost like lace, always makes me think of Aladdin. I call him Aladdin, though it isn't his name."

"I'll visit him," said Noel eagerly.

"Are you going to Tunis?"

"Let me tell you. I want to tell you. But I didn't care to at dinner."

"Sit here, in this corner of the divan. Put up your feet, of course. It is meant for that. I like my divans broad. What will you smoke with your coffee? I smoke a *chibouk*."

"I'm afraid I couldn't manage that. I'll smoke my pipe later. Not just yet. I've brought it with me."

"Of course smoke it when you like. Here are cigarettes meanwhile. Put two or three of these big Touareg cushions behind you. They are good for the back."

"Oh, thanks! Yes, they're splendid. What beautiful lanterns those are! Like great jewels!"

"They, too, come from Tunis. But some of the carpets are from Morocco."

"Have you been there too?"

"Of course."

"I like this dim light. Those rugs fastened to the walls! Are they from Morocco?"

"No. They are all Persian. But I brought them from Egypt. I have never visited Persia. But I hope to go there some day."

"How lucky you are to have lived such a life!"

"As to that, I couldn't live differently," said Sabatier. "I couldn't live an unsuitable life; unsuitable to me, that is."

"Millions of people do, I'm sure."

"Of course they do. But I couldn't submit to that. Death would be preferable," said Sabatier calmly. "Some day when I resign from the army I shall really travel."

"But you have travelled tremendously, haven't you? Taha told me you have been as far as Tombouctoo."

"Yes, I did that. And Larbi came with me."

"Who's Larbi?"

"The fellow who served us at dinner. But the greater part of this marvellous and magnificent, this enticing and sinister and sometimes foul world I haven't seen yet."

"How different you are from the men I've been accustomed to meet!" exclaimed Noel with excitement.

This man, now sitting cross-legged on the broad divan beside him, was arousing in him a greedy passion for travel of which he was almost afraid.

"Am I?" said Sabatier, slightly lifting his eyebrows as if surprised. "What types of men were they?"

"Oh, just English fellows at Oxford, keen on rowing and football, and so on, or mugs like myself, students, bookworms. And then later there were English clergymen. I told you in camp what I was."

"Yes."

Just then Larbi came in with coffee, put it down by them on a low stool of cedarwood and mother-of-pearl, went out, and returned with Sabatier's chibouk.

"But I've nearly forgotten them all," continued Noel. "All this"—he waved a hand vaguely towards the jewelled hanging lamps that shed a faint light over the warm scented room—"and the desert make a man forget English things and people."

Larbi went out, and Noel quickly lit a cigarette and picked up his coffee cup.

"I never really lived till I came out here. I didn't begin to know what life was or what I was. You, with all your experience, must think me half crazy to talk like this."

"Certainly not."

"Don't you? Then I'm glad."

Sabatier took the stem of his chibouk, put the tube to his lips, and began to smoke. And at once a certain calmness and gravity seemed to Noel to change slightly the atmosphere. But the excitement was still alive in him, and the boyish thrill of adventure which made him sometimes seem very young to those he was with. His shyness diminished, and he began to feel ready for frankness.

"I wanted to see you because—partly because—I want to bother you about something, to ask your advice. May I?"

"Of course you may."

"It's about the summer," said Noel more slowly, some of his tiresome shyness suddenly returning upon him. "I shall have to go away from here."

"You must or you'll have fever."

"I know. I thought of going to Sidi Bou Saïd. Madame de Pleunier has kindly recommended a little house there to me. It belongs to a man she calls Sir Tom."

"Tom Challoner. I know him and the house."

"Is it nice?"

"Small but quite nice enough. Right on the edge of the cliff. So Madame de Pleunier spoke of it to you!"

Noel thought that a very faint sound as of irony came into Sabatier's voice as he said that, but perhaps he was mistaken.

"Yes. Sir Tom wants to let the house, and she wanted to do him a good turn."

"I see."

"The price isn't high. I think I shall rent it."

"You might do much worse."

"Madame de Pleunier will be in Paris," said Noel abruptly.

"Ah?"

"So she tells me."

"Usually she goes to Paris in summer till the end of the season there."

"When does that end?"

"Some time in July, early July."

"And then I believe she pays visits."

"I dare say."

"She spoke of going to various châteaux."

"No doubt she does go. She knows a great many people. She belongs to a distinguished French family, the De Joncourts."

"Does she? I didn't know."

"And what has Madame de Pleunier's going to Paris and to French châteaux to do with your possibly going to Tom Challoner's little house at Sidi Bou Said for the summer?" asked Sabatier with apparent simplicity, looking seriously down over his chibouk at the dim blue-and-red, black-and-green-and-white carpet on which it was set.

"Oh, nothing, really. She just happened to tell me."

Sabatier made no comment on this, and they sat for a moment in silence. In it Noel's feeling of shyness returned. But he was resolved to fight it and, making an effort that he felt as fierce, at last he said:

"I want to speak to you about that girl, the dancer, Aziza."

"Ah? What about her? She has a great deal of beauty, though Madame de Pleunier, of course, couldn't see it. But these strange Eastern types are not for the eyes of everyone."

"No."

"Especially every European woman."

"No. These Ouled Nail dancers have rules, I suppose?"

"They conform to certain tribal ordinances, I expect."

Noel shifted slightly on the divan, drank a little more coffee, and then lit a fresh cigarette.

"Do you know what these ordinances are?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I don't. I haven't had occasion to bother about them. These women are brought up to dance and to awaken the sensual desires of men. They are distributed about Algeria, beginning the life very young, and usually, when they have earned what they consider to be an adequate amount of money, they return to the mountains of the Ouled Nail, marry, and settle down into what they consider to be respectability."

"What they consider!" murmured Noel, frowning.

He was silent for a moment and then said:

"Must they stick always to their tribe? Can't they leave it if they wish to?"

"Do you mean permanently?"

"I wasn't thinking of that exactly. I meant for a time ; say, for some months."

"I dare say they could, though I have never heard of one of them doing so. But that may be chance. I have always seen them living together as they do here and following their profession. Why do you want to know ? I am not inquisitive, but of course you have some purpose in asking me this ?"

"I want to take that girl, Aziza, to Tunis when I go for the summer to Sidi Bou Saïd," said Noel in an unusually hard and determined voice, forcing himself to abrupt frankness. "That's why I ask. But there's something else too. You know I can't speak Arabic yet, except a few simple sentences. Because of that I'm tied up when I want to—when I want to do something private. I don't know how to set about it. Dare I ask your help, Sabatier ?"

"Do you wish me to ask the girl, or perhaps the Maréchale, whether such a thing is possible, could be managed ?" said Sabatier in a calm voice, showing not the slightest surprise or critical amusement.

"Yes. I should be awfully grateful to you if you could," said Noel, now feeling that a load had dropped from his shoulders.

"Why not ? It might be only a question of money, perhaps. I don't know."

He let out a small cloud of fragrant smoke into the dimly lighted and deliciously warm room.

"I could easily find out, no doubt."

"Will you, Sabatier, will you ?"

"Yes," he said, dropping out the one word with apparent indifference.

(Strangely, perhaps, this sound of indifference was pleasant to Noel's ears. No astonishment, no amusement, no condemnation ! Just this quiet indifference combined with readiness to do what was wanted. Noel's feelings towards Sabatier mounted suddenly to something like affection.)

"I think it's very good of you," he said warmly. "I'm almost a stranger to you and—and this is a very unusual thing. I know that."

"Very little seems unusual to one who has lived as I have lived for many years. This will be no trouble to me. I think I'll go first to the Maréchale. She is a very wise old thing, though she looks like an idol. And she has great influence over Aziza."

"Do you think—could you tell me whether you think such a girl as Aziza could possibly get to care for a Roumi, to care really ?"

"How can I be sure ?"

"No. But I only want to know what you *think*. You have so much experience and I have none."

"You ask me that question. May I ask you one before answering ?"

"Yes."

"You can't talk much to her or she to you, I suppose ?"

"No, not yet. We can't ! It's very absurd."

"It must make things rather difficult sometimes."

"Yes, it does. But—but somehow we get to understand a certain amount. I can say a few sentences now. But that's all."

"*Compris*. Well, now for your question, and I shall say just what I think."

"Do, please."

"I very much doubt whether an Ouled Nail girl like Aziza could ever get really to care for a Roumi."



Noel's face changed. It was as if a cloud of distress came over it, obscuring its youthfulness and expectation.

"Think of the difference between you! She's about sixteen. That doesn't matter much. But you're, I suppose, about——"

"I'm just going to be thirty-one."

"Ah! But it's not so much a question of age. There's the enormous difference of blood to start with. Add to that the difference between her way of life and yours, what she knows, her kind of knowledge and yours, your code and hers—for even a girl like that may have a code, and depend upon it, *she* has!—her outlook on things and yours. And then, combined with her knowledge that you haven't got, there is her incredible ignorance. You will never be able to get to the bottom of that, however much you try. It will defeat you always. I don't believe she could ever love any man as probably you wish to be loved; even a man of her own people, or even such a man as that Bedouin fellow who tried to murder Bernard. By the way, there's a rumour that he's been seen again on the outskirts of Touggourt."

"Has he?" said Noel, startled.

"It may not be true, but I heard it."

"I don't mind. I shouldn't mind."

"Well, there you have my honest opinion. That sort of girl, I'm nearly sure, hasn't a heart as *you* think of a heart. Unless I mistake you."

"No, no, you don't!" said Noel with a rather lamentable sound in his voice.

"I shouldn't look to her for anything of that kind. She's probably more akin to a little animal than any feminine thing you have had any experience of. But she might like you in her way. Perhaps she does already."

"I think she does," said Noel, less lamentably and more firmly.

"And you care enough for her to want her in Tunis when you are in Sidi Bou Said?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then I'll see what I can do in the matter. It may be only a question of money."

"I'm ready to do all I can in that way, *all*."

"Then I'll go into it."

"I don't know how to thank you enough!" said Noel with warm enthusiasm.

To this remark Sabatier replied with an unexpected comment.

"Perhaps later on you will curse me instead of thanking me."

And then at once he got away from the subject they had been discussing and began to talk about his journey to Tombouctoo with Larbi. To this Noel listened, enthralled, until late in the night. When at last he got up and said he must go Sabatier said:

"You let me spend a night in your camp. I hope you will sleep here. Larbi will make you up a perfect bed on this divan. There's a washing room with a douche. Will you stay? Or perhaps you have made other arrangements?"

He said the last words quite simply, as if without *arrière pensée*. But Noel knew he was thinking of the women's quarter and Aziza.

"Thank you! Thank you! I'll stay with pleasure."

"Good!"

He clapped his hands loudly.

"That is for Larbi. I sleep next door. Larbi will show you everything."

"I'll be gone in the morning. I told Taha I'd breakfast in camp."

"Just as you please."

"I enjoy a walk in the early morning. It's good for my health."

Larbi came, and the bed was quickly prepared. When Noel bade Sabatier good night he said :

"I wonder—would it bother you too much to find out about that girl, about Aziza, whether she could and would come to Tunis, before Thursday ? I see Madame de Pleunier that day and should like to tell her whether I will take Sir Tom's house. She seems rather anxious for a decision."

"I'll try to manage it. Suppose Aziza refuses ? Or the Maréchale refuses for her ?"

"Then I don't know. I'm not sure I shall take the house."

Noel looked away from Sabatier as he said that. A sudden wave of depression swept over him.

Sabatier stood for a moment as if he had something more to say. If it were so, however, he must have decided against saying it. For finally he murmured only "Good night," and his figure wrapped in the thin white burnous disappeared into the passage, leaving Noel alone with Larbi, who waited to attend on him as he made his preparation for bed.

Noel did not see Sabatier the next morning before his early departure. The door of the room next to his was shut. Larbi was up and let him out politely, keeping always the rather stern gravity that seemed to suggest his perpetual consciousness of being 'Hadji.'

The morning air was cool, almost cold, but Noel enjoyed it. He had got it into his head that these walks just after dawn were better for his condition than any medicine. He believed that they 'hardened' him, and it seemed that he was right, for with every day he felt he was getting stronger. As he walked his mind dwelt perpetually on two subjects for thought. One was Sabatier's remark, startling in its implication, 'Perhaps later on you will curse me instead of thanking me'; the other was the rumour that the Bedouin who had attacked Bernard had been seen again in the outskirts of the city. This last piece of news had not put any fear into his heart but had roused in him a feeling of jealousy so intense that at moments it seemed to scorch him like fire. Did Aziza know of this return, if the rumour was true ? It suggested a concentration on her of this desert man that must have overcome his fear of any punishment for his crime. Noel wondered about the Bedouin. Could he love at all in the way of a European ? Was there a kinship between all intense loves ? And mere physical love, however fierce, how did it compare with a love in which body and heart went, as it were, hand in hand, in which the mind had its part as well as the body ? His mind knew nothing as yet of Aziza's, though his body knew much of her body. What sort of mind had a Bedouin ? He would never know. He was sure he would never know. And if the Bedouin and Aziza loved each other he would certainly never be able to understand their love. It would remain a mystery to him. But—and this was a sort of solace to him—he could not believe that Aziza loved the Bedouin. She was too gay at times, at other times too passive and almost complacently calm and indifferent, to be the victim of any deep love. He was inclined to believe that Sabatier was right that she hadn't a heart as he thought of a heart, and that she was more akin to a little animal than to what any European man thought

of as a woman. But he was jealous of her, terribly jealous, and in a wholly physical way which almost disgusted him. There was to him something so ugly, so humiliating in it. He would be on thorns till he knew the result of Sabatier's embassy to the Maréchale and Aziza.

At moments—they were moments in which there was a sort of desperation—he almost wished, or thought he almost wished—that was truer—that Sabatier's suggestion would be met at once by a flat refusal. Then in April this strange pilgrimage of the flesh would have come to an end. He would leave Touggourt. He would be separated from Aziza. For six months certainly, and perhaps for ever. Probably for ever. For in the interval what would her life have been? What nameless experiences would she not have had? He could not come back to her and take up again their association as if nothing had happened in the interim to sully it, to stain it, to cause it to stink to high heaven. If the Maréchale and Aziza refused his offer in not many weeks this desert experience would come to a final end.

And what then?

When Noel put to himself this question he seemed to face a very blank of nothingness. Already he could not imagine life without Aziza as worth living. And yet they could scarcely even talk to each other. But presently they would be able to talk. In Tunis during the summer they would be able to talk fluently. For by then he would have become fluent in Arabic and would certainly be able to understand all, or nearly all, that she said to him. (He found himself assuming that she would leave her comrades and come to Tunis. He must, he would, hope.) And then he would penetrate into that queer little mind and find out something definite about that nature so utterly different from his own and from all the natures he fancied that he at least partially understood.

How intensely interesting that would be! What an excursion for the mind! And his body would be satisfied, too, would be happy and at rest, because it would be freed from the thrall of the physical jealousy which now tormented it. If only the summer were at hand and Sabatier's mission crowned with success!

He waited to know the result of that mission in a condition of painful unrest. He had made up his mind not to visit Aziza again till he knew whether she would come to Tunis or not. He would leave it all in the hands of Sabatier. Surely he would hear something from him before Thursday, when he was to see Madame de Pleunier about the house of Sir Tom. Perhaps only three days to wait. But they would go slowly. And had the Bedouin really been seen in the outskirts of Touggourt? Or was the rumour of his presence false? Noel's jealousy persisted and even grew. He imagined the Bedouin seeing Aziza again. If the man had come back it was for her. But would he venture into the women's quarter? Why not? Since Bernard had brought no accusation against him he was surely safe from pursuit. Till now Noel had not thought of that. He had supposed that because after his attack on Bernard the fellow had fled into the desert he would probably keep away at least for a time, even though Bernard's warning had shown that Bernard thought his return possible. If he had come back so soon it proved that he could not keep away from Aziza. And as news mysteriously travels in the desert—no one knows how—he had probably learned that he was not in danger of punishment.

Noel longed to ask Taha if he knew anything about the Bedouin, but he refrained from doing so. He didn't care to renew his former familiarity

with Taha. They were now on quite good terms, but they were definitely only master and servant, and Noel's manner marked the distance between them. Of course Taha and Amar knew all about what was going on between Noel and Aziza and no doubt talked it over perpetually in their tent. Noel wished they were ignorant of it. He still knew only too well the meaning of *pudeur* and hated the understanding that sometimes showed in their eyes. But life demands many resignations from man, and he was trying to learn some of the lessons of resignation.

Tuesday came and he went out shooting with Taha and the black boy who had accompanied him on his first shooting excursion and was now attached to his service on three days of each week as guide to the haunts of game. Noel still shot abominably, but now and then he brought down a bird and was beginning to feel fairly at home with a gun. No message arrived from Sabatier. Wednesday came. Noel went out for a long ride in the desert towards the great sand dunes that stretch for many kilometres to the south beyond Touggourt. Taha was with him. They took some lunch fastened to the Arab saddle which Taha, of course, rode on, though Noel's saddle was an English make, and he rode with long stirrups. They were out for many hours. Noel wanted to tire his body in the hope of partially overcoming the fever of unrest of his brain, painfully on the alert because of the news he was waiting for. At some distance out in the dunes they got off their horses, and Noel lay down on the warm sand, ate his lunch, and then pulled out his pipe.

Taha was a little way off with the horses who, as usual when they dismounted for any length of time, were hobbled. The sun beat down strongly that day, and the sky was without a cloud. There was nothing to be seen under the blue sky but the sheeny gold of the dunes billowing to infinity. The silence was undisturbed except by an occasional movement of the horses or a faint cough from Taha, who was smoking a pipe of keef. It was a world of sand waves under a ceiling of blue. And the desert breeze gave it life, that strange personal breeze which is so unlike the breeze from the sea and has a feathery freshness unmatched in the world that lies far from the desert.

Noel lay back against the dune that rose up behind him and pulled his sun helmet low down over his eyes. He had meant to light his pipe but refrained. Even so much activity irked him at that moment. He felt a desire to be entirely passive in this golden stillness of nature, in this remoteness from what he thought of as 'man.' True, Taha was there not far from him, but as he lay Noel did not see him. And he denied Taha's existence for a little while to satisfy his inner need for complete solitude.

How would it be? Would he ever go back to the narrow world he had contentedly lived in, return to the man he had been and from whom he had separated? And all because of an original doctor's verdict and an original doctor's advice! That seemed quite impossible. But then, what was to be his life?

He was waiting now for a decision, the decision of a woman who looked like a bedizened idol and a girl as utterly different from himself as one human being can be from another. And he felt as if the way the decision turned would have a perhaps permanent effect on his fate.

If Aziza refused, or if the Maréchale refused for her, should he go to Sidi Bou Saïd for the summer? What would he do there alone during all the hot months? He knew no one in Tunis. There was that seaside place

not far off. The Commandant had spoken to him of it. He remembered the name, La Marsa. The Bey of Tunis and his family lived there. And the French Resident removed there from Tunis in the summer. The Pleuniers had spoken of him and would no doubt give Noel a letter to him if he went to Sidi Bou Saïd. But what would be the use of that? A high French official wouldn't care to be bothered with him. There was that 'Arab palace,' as Madame de Pleunier had called it, which belonged to friends of hers and in which she had once spent a summer. Apparently it was close to Sir Tom's house. But Madame de Pleunier had said, or implied, that the owners occupied it as a rule only in the cooler months of the year. Nothing to do in Sidi Bou Saïd for five or six months but bathe in the sea and perhaps sun-bathe, unless the sun were too hot, which was probable.

He might perhaps study the ruins of Carthage, pick up some fragments of ancient stone, possibly come across a few coins. He could read, study Arabic.

But he was really interested in the study of Arabic only because he longed to be able to talk with Aziza and to enter into her mind. That was his incentive. If she were out of his life?

He lay right back against the warm sand and shut his eyes, pulling his sun helmet down over them, trying to give his whole self to the desert. But the thought of Aziza prevented that, although he always connected her in his mind with the desert. She was not actually a child of the desert. She was not a Bedouin. But she dwelt in it now. She danced in it. She was in Touggourt for it.

That last was an ugly thought, and he frowned under his sun helmet. The desert and its needs, its requirements! The sacrifices it demanded!

And yet was Aziza sacrificed? There seemed little of the victim in her. She had not the air of a victim, did not look like a victim, struggling against, or resigned to, a horrible fate. With her *'camarades'* she was twitteringly gay. He had heard the light sound of her laughter. She was not ashamed of her life. It was the life of her comrades, the dancers from the mountains of the Ouled Naïl.

'The fact is,' Noel said to himself, 'I *can't* understand her. My upbringing prevents it. My outlook on life till I came out here was so purely English and English-conventional that it's almost impossible for me to accommodate myself to an African, a Saharan outlook, do what I will. But if she comes to Tunis for me I *will* get to understand her. Sabatier could probably understand her. Bernard might. Even the Commandant might, perhaps.'

He thought of Madame de Pleunier. She would, perhaps, understand enough only to hate. Woman can so hate woman, more than man can ever hate man. But why should Madame de Pleunier so hate a girl like Aziza?

Naïve though he still was, a penetrating thought just then came to Noel. "Can she hate her because she envies her secretly?"

Noel and Taha returned into camp from the great dunes towards sunset. As they rode in, from a distance they saw a horse standing against the white wall of the bordj, and Taha said:

"That Moosoo Sabatier's horse! Him waitin to see you."

"Bring us tea and rum and biscuits!" exclaimed Noel.

"I bringin."

As they rode up Sabatier came out of Noel's tent and saluted them.

"Forgive me! I ventured to have a look at your desert library. I see you go in for the classics. Except for one book—apart from some French yellowbacks."

"Which is that?" asked Noel, dismounting.

"*The Sheikh's Revenge*. What infernal rubbish! Do forgive me. How did you come to choose that?"

"I didn't choose it," said Noel, smiling. "An old lady at Upper Green gave it to me when I left, thinking it would help me to understand the Sahara."

Sabatier threw up his brown hands.

"*Mon Dieu! La pauvre chère femme!*"

"Oh, many people in England believe that sort of thing about the Sahara."

"Isn't it one of the great tragedies of life what human beings can be brought to believe?"

"Yes. Now, Taha, the tea!"

"Yes, sir."

Till it was brought Noel asked no questions of Sabatier, though he was torn with a painful curiosity which he tried not to show. Sabatier talked lightly of the Commandant's visit to Biskra, from which he had just returned. But when tea was brought and Taha had left them Sabatier said at once:

"I have done what you asked me to do. I have seen the Maréchale and Aziza. By the way, the girl really likes you."

A thrill of joy went through Noel. It was so keen that it startled him.

"*Likes* you, in her curious un-European, not at all passionate, way."

Noel's face changed, though he tried to look calm and impassive.

"She is proud of being desired so much by a Roumi."

Noel noticed that he didn't say 'loved.'

"She was startled, like a child, by your Tunis proposition. Such an offer had never been made to her before. But more than that. It seems that it had never been made to any one of her '*camarades*.' She is very proud of that and has told them all."

Noel wilted but still tried hard to look calmly interested and neither too interested nor upset. His feelings were so mingled in that moment that his mind was clouded with confusion. Quickly he poured some rum into his tea.

"Yes?"

"I told her first and then went to the Maréchale."

"How did *she* take it? What did *she* say?"

Now Noel could not help showing his eagerness.

"We had a rather long talk. She is a very businesslike lady. The proposition surprised even her. But it interested her, or seemed to, very much indeed."

"Then she'll let Aziza come?" exclaimed Noel.

"She didn't promise that exactly. But I believe that she might on certain conditions."

"I am sure I could agree to them. I'm ready to. Please, what are they?"

"You would have to let Aziza come back to Touggourt when the hot months were over and return to her life here."

"I'd promise that!" said Noel without hesitation.

In his mind, nevertheless, he made a reservation. It was not that he meant to break faith with the Maréchale. No. But he was depending on the power of time. What might not time do in the course of five or six months?

"I should be coming back here then to spend another winter," he added.

"Ah!"

"But you spoke of conditions. What others were there, please?"

"As I rather expected, they seem to be mainly concerned with finance."

"Oh! But that's the Maréchale, not Aziza?"

"I had no talk of money with Aziza. She seems to leave herself in the Maréchale's hands. Perhaps she has to. I have not gone into that."

"Could you tell me the conditions?"

"The Maréchale seemed to think that as what you propose is so very unusual an unusual guarantee should be given. (I'm putting it, of course, in my way, translating it into our language.)"

"Yes, of course."

"She thinks you should put down a sum of money in advance. While you are here, in fact."

"I could do that," said Noel.

He was feeling very uncomfortable. Not because he was inclined to be 'close' about money, but because this cold talk about money seemed to diminish painfully the value of what he felt for and desired of Aziza.

"Of course I could do that."

There was a pause. Then he felt obliged to ask:

"Did she say—did she mention what sum?"

"Yes. I'll tell you in francs. You can calculate it, no doubt, into pounds if you wish to. You know the exchange? Or you could find out what it is at the moment?"

"Yes," said Noel, feeling increasingly uncomfortable, almost, indeed, miserable—and tarnished.

Sabatier mentioned a sum in French francs. There was a silence, during which Noel calculated in his head how much it would probably be if changed into pounds. After a careful calculation, slowly made, he came to the conclusion that it would amount approximately to a hundred and fifty pounds in English money.

"That's about a hundred and fifty pounds in English money, I think," he said, not looking at Sabatier while he spoke.

"Is it? That is what the Maréchale seemed to think would be fair. We did not go into any financial question about Aziza's stay in Tunis. It was assumed, I imagine, that that would be entirely your affair, the expenses, and so on, to be arranged, I concluded, between you and Aziza."

"Of course, of course!"

Again there was a pause of silence. It was broken by Noel, who said: "I am very grateful to you for what you have done, Sabatier. It was very kind of you to take this trouble for me."

He tried to throw real warmth into his voice, but just at that moment he felt painfully reserved, tied up with reserve.

"I have told you that some day you may curse me for this, though I hope not. But the desert, though called by many monotonous, is full of surprises," said Sabatier.

"I'm willing to face them, Sabatier. But what surprise do you anticipate for me?"

"I think perhaps we needn't go into that. Indeed, I couldn't exactly say."

"Were there any other conditions?"

"Well, the Maréchale seemed to wish the whole matter, if the bargain is made and the money paid over, to be kept entirely secret. These women, like nearly all women who are entirely uneducated, are full of suspicions. They don't trust anyone as a rule."

"But if Aziza has told all the dancers already!" exclaimed Noel, showing the vexation and distress which he had tried to conceal when Sabatier had mentioned that ugly fact.

"The Maréchale will put that right—or wrong, if you choose to call it so. Aziza will be made to deny what she said. She has already been sharply rebuked for rushing to tell it. The Maréchale will probably say that your offer has been refused, if they insist on believing it was made."

"That hardly puts me in a better light," said Noel bitterly.

"My dear fellow, if you are going to bother about what a pack of desert prostitutes think of you!" said Sabatier with gentle, almost melancholy sarcasm.

Noel felt himself redden to the roots of his thick curly hair.

"Well, one doesn't care to——" he began.

But he stopped. What was the use of talking about it, of making a fuller exposure of his feelings to Sabatier? But he thought, with intense irritation, of the gossip at his expense that must be going on among the dancers. The Roumi who had made the extraordinary, the almost incredible offer to the youngest dancer of them all and who had had his offer turned down!

Evidently realizing Noel's dismay and vexation, and perhaps wishing not to add to it by his presence, Sabatier got up and said:

"I have to dine with the De Pleuniers to-night rather early to play cards, so I ought to go now. But may I give you one piece of advice?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"If this affair should by any chance become rumoured outside the dancers' quarters and you should hear of it, I should advise you to deny that there's any truth in it."

"Why? Because it puts me in a contemptible position! Having made such an offer and having it supposedly refused?"

"I wasn't thinking of the supposed refusal but of the offer. If I were you I should entirely deny that it was ever made by you."

"Yes? Why?"

"It's usually a mistake to let women get wind of these little affairs."

"Women! But——"

Sabatier looked steadily at Noel with his vivid blue eyes.

"Madame de Pleunier," he said. "And now I must go."

"Taha!" Noel called in a clouded voice. "Get Captain Sabatier's horse!"

"Yes, sir!"

During the two or three minutes that elapsed before the horse was brought from the bordj they talked of indifferent things.

"*Au revoir!*" said Sabatier as he swung himself easily into the saddle.



*"Au revoir ! Many thanks for all you have done."*

Sabatier smiled faintly and cantered away, leaving Noel in a state of acute indecision.

From what Sabatier had just told him it seemed to Noel that by paying over the sum of one hundred and fifty pounds or, rather, its equivalent in French francs to Aziza, or to the Maréchale on Aziza's behalf, he could obtain what he wanted so strongly, even so intensely, Aziza's presence in Tunis during all the time he was in Sidi Bou Saïd. He knew that Sidi Bou Saïd was only a short distance from Tunis. He would be able to spend as much time as he liked with Aziza. He would be able to learn enough Arabic to talk with her freely and get really to know her. Best of all, he would have removed her from the abominable life she was leading in Touggourt, a life evidently not abominable to her but to him. And for this he would have to pay, it seemed, not more than a hundred and fifty pounds and, of course, the expenses in Tunis.

He could manage that. The money matter didn't trouble him, though he hated having to make a money bargain in connection with feeling. But how could that be helped when Aziza was an Ouled Naïf? What troubled him was something else: Sabatier's strange, almost sinister hint about Madame de Pleunier. What did that mean? Why should Sabatier have given it, and evidently because he thought it ought to be given, as a sort of warning? In fact, it was meant as a warning. And it had made such an impression on Noel that it had caused in him this indecision.

What had Madame de Pleunier to do with his life? Nothing. She was a mere acquaintance without power over him, without any reason for wishing to have power. Noel was beginning to suspect that possibly Sabatier's intimacy with her was, or perhaps had been—that might be nearer the mark—a very close one. They might, perhaps, have liked each other very much. Certainly they knew each other extremely well, well enough to be sometimes irritated by each other in the way of intimates who are on the lookout for, and are troubled by, recurring peculiarities. He could not detect any fondness between them now, but he had a vague feeling that perhaps once they might have been fond of each other. And have found each other out, perhaps? Was that it? Or had it been only that Sabatier had found out Madame de Pleunier? Evidently Sabatier distrusted her character. That seemed to Noel obvious. Or why this peculiar warning? And what could it mean? He was troubled by it and also now by the thought of the Bedouin, though Sabatier had not mentioned him. But something caused Noel to think of the Bedouin when he thought of Madame de Pleunier, though they had nothing to do with one another, and there was, of course, no slightest connection between them.

That was odd, and mentally he sought for the reason of it. He found it almost immediately in the fact of a double warning which had come to him in connection with Aziza. Bernard had warned him about the Bedouin because of Aziza, and Sabatier about Madame de Pleunier, also because of Aziza. That was the link.

Suppose that he gave her up? If not at once, when the hot months came and he was obliged to go from Touggourt? Suppose he drew back from this ugly money bargain with the elderly idol who sat at the receipt of custom in the Avenue de Biskra? Suppose, too, that he decided not to take the house of Sir Tom at Sidi Bou Saïd?

Bernard had said to him once, 'There is danger round that girl.' The words returned to him now and increased his indecision.

It was on that evening that he began definitely to feel that he was in a sort of bondage. He knew it when his indecision made him consider the possibility of giving the whole thing up and facing an empty summer without plan, without responsibilities, without passion, without companionship. A summer, in fact, absolutely free. How would such a summer be?

Directly he asked himself that question he was overtaken by a sensation of dreariness that was almost overwhelming. What would he do with it? If he stayed on in Africa how would he live through it? He would have to go north, probably to some place by the sea, or into the hills, perhaps, somewhere near Constantine. Or he might, perhaps, go again to El Kantara. There was water there, the protection of the great bastions of rock soaring towards the blue, their red against the blue of the African sky. He might settle down in the little inn there. It would be much cooler there than in Biskra. Biskra would be impossible.

But whatever he thought of as a possibility for a lonely summer now seemed to him impossible. He would shuffle off the incubus of perhaps impending danger. He would rid himself of his growing doubts, still, however, quite vague, about Madame de Pleunier and her attitude to him. But what would be left for him? An empty and utterly lonely summer.

Unless he went back to England to show himself to Doctor Rutherford Craven! Of course he would have to return to North Africa for the following winter. But he might spend the summer in some warm place in England. Perhaps in Torquay or in Bournemouth.

His heart sickened at the thought. No, in any case he would stay in North Africa.

That night he did not visit Aziza. He could not see her again till he had absolutely decided what he was going to do. And he was still companioned by indecision when he had finished his solitary meal, smoked his pipe, and finally, at an early hour, got into his narrow camp bed.

He slept for about three hours, then woke up, and in a moment was wide awake and found himself thinking immediately of Madame de Pleunier and the Bedouin. Again they were linked together in his mind.

He looked at his watch. It was half an hour after midnight. A rather cold night, but clear and lit by a three-quarter moon. He could see the silver of the moonlight creeping in under the canvas at the bottom of the tent and casting its pale rays on the ground only partially covered by rugs. He lay and looked at it and heard the distant barking of the guard dogs and realized Africa and knew that whatever happened in regard to the Maréchale and Aziza he would not go to England in summer. He had never visited either Torquay or Bournemouth, but he had a definite idea, from certain brief visits he had paid to English seaside places, what they must be like. And he saw them in imagination as totally unromantic, hedged in by conventionality, presided over by British respectabilities, with their lending libraries, their teashops, their asphalt promenades, their kiosks, their hotels, their boarding-houses which offered a home from home. Perhaps his imagination did these two famous watering-places a grievous wrong, but he did not believe it. He heard the English church bells mingling their summoning notes with the barking of guard dogs round the tents of the nomads, and he knew that he would rather hear the dogs than the bells. Hearing the dogs, he did not long for the bells, but hearing only the bells, he

would long for the dogs. And forcibly he imagined himself back in England, back in his clerical life, hearing the chants and the hymns, mounting into the pulpit and looking down over the congregation as he spread out his notes on the stand which he had adjusted to the right height for his eyes by manipulating a screw. The organ sounded in his ears, accompanying the hymn that preceded the sermon. And now he was going to preach.

How could he ever preach again to a congregation after what had happened? Impossible, surely, unless he was a prince of humbugs, and he still felt a great love of sincerity and could not consider himself as a totally insincere man. Yet his clergyman's clothes—in his mind he called them his clergyman's kit—lay carefully hidden in a locked suitcase, and he was masquerading out here in the belly of the desert as a layman.

But why should these people be told that he was a clergyman? What right had they to know it? It would not interest them. It did not concern them. He had never lied to them, had never told them that he was not what he was. Simply he had not spoken about the matter. And why should he speak about it? One did not go about proclaiming all that one was to people who would not be interested. Every man surely had a right to his harmless secrets. And Noel, lying there, with his eyes fixed on the silver rays that stole in to visit him from the desert, resolved not to blame himself morbidly for concealing what no one in Touggourt had any desire to know or any reason for knowing. And the church bells died out of his ears, and presently again he fell asleep, thanking what men thank sometimes in moments of satisfaction that he was still in Africa.

On the following day when, still undecided about Aziza and Sidi Bou Said, though really on the verge of the only decision possible to him, he went to pay his visit to Madame de Pleunier, he found her not alone, but sitting with a Catholic priest, the *aumônier* of the French officers stationed in Touggourt and of the very few French people who had drifted there to earn precarious livings as doctor, dentist, coiffeur, storekeeper, necessary folk and necessitous, with accompanying females.

Noel had seen this man several times but had never spoken to him though more than once they had politely saluted each other. He was short, sun-tanned, and had a black beard and moustache. Priests in North Africa wore their beards, as clean-shaven men at that time were neither understood nor appreciated by the natives, and it was considered less than priestly to wear only a moustache like an officer. He had bright, but very small and searching dark eyes and heavy dark eyebrows. His eyes had an inquisitive and rather fanatical expression. He didn't look very clean.

This was the last man Noel wished to meet at that moment. And his unexpected advent had been very irritating to Madame de Pleunier, who had meant to see Noel alone and clinch the bargain about Sir Tom's house. He had come to call on the Commandant's wife without any special reason for calling. She was what is called 'a good Catholic' and always turned up on Sundays at Mass, and she was, of course, the 'first lady' in this out-of-the-way place. So the *aumônier* was there calling upon her. And they were talking about the coming hot weather, amiably on the *aumônier's* part, with carefully concealed irritation on Madame de Pleunier's.

When Noel came in she greeted him with her swift and rather mechanical smile, followed immediately by a vague look, and introduced him to the priest, explaining in her very perfect French—she spoke singularly charming

French—that Noel was English but talked French and was now learning Arabic.

This statement, quite unexpected by Noel, startled him. Who could have told Madame de Pleunier that he was studying Arabic? He had not mentioned it to her. The reason of his study, the desire to be able to talk with Aziza, led him to feel secretive about it, though it was natural enough that he should wish to know something of the language of the country while he lived in it. Taha must have gossiped in Touggourt.

He was greatly taken aback at meeting the priest. Seeing an ecclesiastic gave him a guilty feeling which he detested.

The priest's very bright, fanatical eyes, under the heavy dark eyebrows, rested upon him with an interest which seemed to him not free from suspicion, while Madame de Pleunier, in a voice that sounded lazy, because she was irritated and therefore needed to act, explained that he had come to the desert in search of health and was beginning to find it.

"*N'est-ce pas ?*" she added to Noel.

"*Mais oui, mais certainement oui !*" he said, wondering uncasily whether the priest, whose name was Père Anastase, might not, by a process of priestly intuition, guess that here before him was a fellow worker for God, though of a different faith.

An absurd idea, of course, but he had it.

Père Anastase in sonorous French, with much rolling of *rs*, enquired first how Noel liked North Africa and went on to say :

"*Monsieur est Catholique ?*"

"*Mais non, mais non,*" replied Noel hastily.

"*Protestant, alors ?*" said the priest.

"*Mais oui—Protestant !*" Noel assented with anxious quickness.

This answer seemed to satisfy the sacerdotal curiosity of Père Anastase, and here Madame de Pleunier intervened and, several times turning her experienced reddish-brown eyes upon Noel in a glance that suggested a slightly ironical sympathy combined with intimate understanding of their common predicament, began to speak about Sidi Bou Saïd.

The priest knew it, as he had been for a time attached to the cathedral in Tunis and had not always been forced to follow his destiny in the midst of the sands. (Noel wondered why he was forced to now but did not enquire.) And he spoke of Tunis with longing, which was just what Madame de Pleunier had expected and was the reason why she had spoken of Sidi Bou Saïd. Beneath her often rather vague manner she was a woman of purpose, and what seemed her most trifling remarks were frequently prompted by a concealed train of thought which her hearers were far from suspecting. Her intention now was to increase her influence upon Noel in favour of Sidi Bou Saïd and Tunis by adding to it the influence of another who, she knew, longed to return to that region and considered Touggourt as exile. She therefore encouraged Père Anastase to expand on the subject, and he grew quite eloquent, while Noel listened, occasionally throwing in a brief remark in French. By inducing this she paid herself back for the irritation she had been feeling against the priest because of his unseasonable visit.

"What is it like in the summer, monsieur?" asked Noel when a pause came, forgetting to say "*mon Père.*" "Is the heat very great?"

Madame de Pleunier smiled at the question, and her smile seemed to express something like a gentle pity at the ignorance which prompted it. Father Anastase promptly burst forth again, more sonorously than ever,

this time in ardent praise of the Tunisian climate : "*Si on n'est pas dans le sud.*" He compared the comparatively mild summers of Tunis and Sidi Bou Said with the fierce and feverish heat of Touggourt and seemed to look back upon his stay in Tunisia as life in a lost paradise. Madame de Pleunier listened complacently. Noel had never before seen her look so complacent. And when the priest ceased from his panegyrics she said that she had found her summer in Sidi Bou Said one of the most agreeable she had ever spent.

"But then why did you not repeat it, madame ?" asked Father Anastase.

She replied that she could not forgo her yearly visit to Paris and her autumn tour of the châteaux of her many friends and some time in their country home.

"One has to keep up a little with the great world," she said, but not arrogantly.

Nevertheless, it was evident to both her hearers that by the great world she meant the world of Paris and the aristocratic French world, with neither of which they had anything to do.

Soon after this Father Anastase got up to go, either because he felt that Madame de Pleunier wished him to go, or because he considered that he had done his duty by a lady whom he respected as the wife of the Commandant and a regular attendant at Mass in his little chapel.

Before saying good-bye to Noel he said :

"I believe you live some way out in a camp, do you not, monsieur ?" Noel said that he did.

"Then perhaps you will excuse me for not having the pleasure of calling upon you, as I have no horse and do not care to ride on a donkey before the soldiers."

A faint expression of sarcasm showed about Madame de Pleunier's lips, which seemed to Noel silently to form the statement that Christ on one occasion did not disdain to ride on an ass.

"But I hope," added the priest, "that when you come into town, as I know you sometimes do, you will visit me. Anyone will tell you where I live—close to the Avenue de Biskra."

Noel shot an uneasy and furtive glance at Madame de Pleunier when that was said. (Had it been said with intention ? Could the priest know ?) But she was not looking at him, and her face wore at the moment its vague expression.

"Thank you, *mon Père*," he answered, this time remembering not to say 'monsieur.' "I will certainly come one day."

"I hope so. I wish you were of my congregation. But there must, alas, be diversities of faith."

In saying the last words his voice suddenly took on an ecclesiastical sound. Then he bent over Madame de Pleunier's hand and went out, his black soutane shaking behind the heels of his clumsy black boots.

When the door closed behind him the vague expression immediately left Madame de Pleunier's face, and she looked more animated.

"Father Anastase is not a bad fellow," she said.

"Oh, I'm sure not !" said Noel, rather surprised at this casual remark about a priest coming from her lips, as she was evidently a good Catholic and no doubt now and then confessed to the father.

"Poor man, he hates being here."

"But is he obliged to be here ? Why didn't he stay on in Tunis ?"

"He had to leave. He was sent here."

"Oh?"

"He was foolish."

She spoke slowly, almost drawling the words.

"Really?"

"I believe they found out that he had something to do with a woman, and so he was deprived of his situation and sent to this place of exile."

"As a punishment?"

"I suppose so. And now he lives near the Avenue de Biskra."

After she had said this there was a momentary silence between them. Noel was feeling very uncomfortable and uncertain. Before Father Anastase went uneasiness had seized him. The priest lived near the Avenue de Biskra. Had he, perhaps, got to know of the Englishman's visits to the court of the dancing girls? Probably he spoke Arabic, and if so he heard native gossip. He might easily know. And now Madame de Pleunier, and surely with significance, dwelt on the Avenue de Biskra. Why? Could she be thinking of him, Noel? Could she have heard of his visits there? It suddenly occurred to him that he had, perhaps, been living in a fool's paradise. Though Touggourt was often called a city it was really a small place. It was, in fact, only a big village set in the sands, though it had once been a place of considerable importance ruled by a sultan, who was succeeded by a bey. Probably the priest knew all about Noel's connection with Aziza. Perhaps Madame de Pleunier knew. Perhaps, indeed, everyone knew. For a moment Noel felt like a man whose nakedness suddenly is uncovered and saw himself as a blind fool who, vainly imagining he could work in the dark all the time, had been exposed to a blaze of light.

As Noel, under this painful impression, did not speak, Madame de Pleunier's acute social instinct came to the rescue and she said:

"The Church decrees celibacy for its priests, but Africa sometimes gets the better of the Church. The revenges of nature make the efforts of man often seem very puny. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," said Noel.

"You say that with intense conviction," she said, looking at him intently for a moment.

"Oh, did I? Your words suddenly struck me as so awfully true."

He paused, then added:

"And tragic."

Interest showed in her eyes.

"You are a puzzle to me, Monsieur Herriot," she said.

When she said that Noel felt suddenly a sense of relief. If really he was a puzzle to Madame de Pleunier probably she did not know. Had she known, she would hardly have said that. So he thought.

"Why, please?" he ventured, wishing to make sure of something, if that were possible.

"Perhaps it wouldn't be easy to tell you exactly. And perhaps it would be wiser of me not to tell you if I could."

"But why—wiser not?"

"I have noticed that men dislike being explained to themselves," she said rather drily. "Many people, and not only men, don't care to be told what they are."

Perhaps thinking that she had said something rather severe and that he might apply the severity to himself, she added:

"Though I don't know why *you* should mind."

Noel felt rather afraid of her. He was ashamed of that and began to be conscious that he must always have had a faint feeling of something like fear of her ever since he had first met her. He did not quite understand this fear. And this lack of complete understanding made him dislike it all the more.

"But if it's so, I suppose I'm like the other men," he said uneasily.

"I find you different from most of the many men I have met."

"Am I? In what way, I wonder?"

"There seems to me something that puts you rather apart from most of them. It is not unattractive. Don't you think that. It is the contrary. If I may speak rather frankly, you give me the impression of a great freshness, almost like the freshness of a boy, though of course you are not a boy."

"No. I'm nearly thirty-one."

"And it is combined with something else, and the combination puzzles me a little. I seem to see you almost oddly eager for life for a man of your age, and yet perhaps secretly rather afraid of life. I hope you don't mind my frankness."

"Not at all!" said Noel with a haste that was rather embarrassed.

"And that combination is rather new to me, who have lived mostly among rather sophisticated Frenchmen, many of them officers. None of *them* is certainly like you."

"Perhaps it's because you meet me in Africa and Africa is so utterly new and astonishing to me. That must be it. Till I came out here I had travelled very little."

"Really!"

"Yes. I had only seen something of France and Switzerland."

After a slight pause she said.

"That *must* be it then!"

But he felt—he knew, in fact—that she had said a thing which was not what she thought.

"But now," she continued with a complete change of tone, "to come to our *moutons*! Have you arrived at any decision about Sir Tom's house? I should like to set his mind at rest about that before I go off to France for the summer. If you have decided against it I should like to tell him so at once so that he may look about for another tenant."

The curious secret fear of Madame de Pleunier, slight, certainly, but definite, which Noel was beginning to be aware of unpleasantly but which was combined with a consciousness that something in her attracted some part of him, and with his knowledge that he was now living in a way that she would surely hate and despise if she knew of it—and possibly she did know, but he fancied not—made him wish just then very much to please her. He had come to her still undecided about plans for the summer and wondering whether he had, perhaps, better make a clean cut in his life, however much it hurt him, break his connection with Aziza, and give up the idea of Sidi Bou Saïd. But now he felt that he must do what Madame de Pleunier seemed evidently to want of him, though he still wondered why she was so keen on it. She was certainly giving him a chance of refusal by saying that if he decided against Sidi Bou Saïd she would like to tell Sir Tom so. Nevertheless, something told him that if he did that she would be vexed, perhaps even irritated with him. He didn't want that, and suddenly he made up his mind that he would go to Sidi Bou Saïd. Even if he

broke off with Aziza he must go somewhere, and the idea of England and perhaps Torquay or Bournemouth in his present mood was hateful to him. But the absolute truth was simply that he felt a sudden powerful urge to give Madame de Pleunier what she wanted. (He wondered about that afterwards.) And he said :

"I've been thinking it over and I don't believe I could do better. Especially after what the priest said just now."

"Father Anastase."

"Yes. So I think I'd better decide to take that house if really I can get it at the price you mentioned."

"Oh, I'll answer for that. Then I can write to Sir Tom?"

"Yes, please. It's very kind of you to take so much trouble for me."

"I like doing a good turn for a friend. And I'm very fond of Sir Tom. And when I'm in Paris, and later on in country houses seeing friends, I shall like to think of you in that dear little house. I know you will like it, and you'll love Sidi Bou Said. Everyone does. Then I'll write to-day to Sir Tom."

And then she talked with unusual animation and cordiality of other matters till Noel got up to go, wondering whether he had done the right thing in being so hasty and definite and why he had felt impelled to do it. Some strong influence must have come out from Madame de Pleunier. Could she have been governed in the desire she had certainly felt for him to take that house by a very strong friendship for this Sir Tom? Was she perhaps very fond of him? Noel was often wondering about her and her feelings. Mentally he had debated about her exact feeling for and relation to Sabatier. He had even asked himself more than once what she and the Commandant felt for each other, how they were with each other when they were together alone. And now this Sir Tom!

Why had she rather insisted on the fact that she would be in Paris and visiting in the châteaux of her friends during the summer? She had wished to drive that certainty into Noel's mind. But was it important? How could it influence him? What had it to do with him?

Anyhow, he had now taken the plunge, given his word. His summer was arranged for and would be passed at Sidi Bou Said. But something else, and much more important, was still undecided.

What was he going to do about Aziza?

After leaving Madame de Pleunier that day Noel felt more definitely than ever before that he had come to crossroads in his life. He stood at them in hesitation. Which way would he go? He had certainly just reached a decision, yet he had never felt more undecided than he did now. The meeting, so entirely unexpected, with the priest had something to do with this indecision.

Some words said that day by Madame de Pleunier had struck him forcibly and remained in his mind. 'The revenges of nature make the efforts of man often seem very puny. Don't you think so?' A tragic statement and it had gone home to him. According to Madame de Pleunier, Father Anastase had suffered from one of these revenges of nature. And Noel felt that this fact had a curious application to his own case. The Protestant priest had met the Catholic priest in the desert, and both had fallen from grace. But the one had been punished definitely by a decree of man and the other not. And the one who had been punished seemed quite



unconcerned except for his regret at being exiled from Tunis. No prickings of conscience showed in those small, bright, inquisitive and fanatical eyes.

And did Noel's conscience prick him? He realized that the influence of place upon him had been so very strong that it had almost sent his conscience to sleep. Nature really had triumphed over him, was triumphing still. For he was not really contrite about his new way of life. On the contrary, it had seemed to bring him much closer to the brotherhood of man than he had been till he had entered upon it. And though he felt that he was standing at crossroads and hesitating which way to go, he did not look on the way he was longing to take as the evil way. He was thinking, rather, of difficulties that might beset him if he took it and of possible unhappiness that might come to him. He was emphatically not conscience-stricken. The money bargain suggested, or demanded, by the Maréchale certainly seemed to him ugly still. But what he was really thinking about was simply the question of his own happiness.

He decided that before attempting to solve this question that was troubling him he must go again to Aziza. He wondered very much how she would receive him after what had happened, how she would be with him, whether he would notice any great change in her now that she knew how much he wanted her. Evidently she had felt girlish triumph when she had spread the great news through the camp of the dancing girls. Her vanity at least had been gratified. He wondered whether what he thought of as her heart had been at all touched. Sabatier would not believe that. But Sabatier, well though he knew the different types of dwellers in the Sahara, might be mistaken. He could not be sure. He only thought a dancing girl could not love a Roumi as a Roumi wished to be loved.

Noel must judge for himself. But how he cursed his ignorance of Aziza's language that evening when he set out after dark for the court of the dancers. He could not even get into contact with the Maréchale about his strange proposition without summoning an interpreter. For one wild moment he thought of calling on the services of Taha. How delighted Taha would be to serve as a go-between in such an intimate matter! It would be a triumph for him after Noel's stand-off manner with him since the old intimacy between them had been broken and the master and servant régime had been instituted. But, no, that was impossible. If he decided to carry his project through he must first try to come to some more definite conclusion about the state of Aziza's feelings towards him, and then, if he felt that she really did care even a little for him, of course 'in her way,' he must resort once again to the good offices of Sabatier. Sabatier knew now all about this adventure and had neither laughed at it nor encouraged it. He had even taken it almost as a matter of course, or, if not quite as that, at any rate in a casual way as nothing to be surprised about. Noel felt that he could harden himself sufficiently to use Sabatier as a go-between if—but that was the question not yet decided on!—if he made up his mind to go through with the matter.

He went on foot in the dark to the city, refusing Taha's urgent offer to accompany him and guard him from the dangers of the night. He was getting to be careless of possible danger in the belly of the desert as his familiarity with it increased and had the stupid feeling, known to so many travellers in far-away places, that where he was must be safe because he was there. In this neighbourhood he was now, of course, thoroughly well

known, and Taha had long ago taken care to spread the news that his employer was an intimate of the Commandant's.

On his way he met several nomads and wandering Arabs going he knew not whither in the dark, who gazed at him with keen curiosity in their birdlike bright eyes but did not attempt to molest him. Two or three murmured the Arab greeting, and Noel replied. And when he did that absurdly he felt African and longed to penetrate much more deeply into the unfathomable strangeness of this strange and wonderful country. On what errand were these men, muffled in their burnouses, padding over the sands in the dark? He longed to know more of their lives. Almost a passion of curiosity woke in him sometimes. Though he had not yet fully realized it an ache of curiosity, curiosity of romance, had pushed him towards Aziza as well as desire of the body. And it still persisted in him and might conquer the fighting hesitation that seemed sometimes to spread through his mind like a warning.

It was a dark night and vapours, like wispy veils, obscured large parts of the starry fields. Almost strangely still were the airs that often steal furtively to and fro over the breast of the sands. When Noel reached the high wall that protected the homes of the dancers and the courtyard and dancing café, he heard no sound of music from within. The musicians were taking breath and having a moment's rest. This seemed to Noel unusual, and he disliked the silence, which lay on him like a weight for a moment as he paused by the blackness of the wall. He, too, needed a breathing space. That was how he felt it. The crossroads! Which road would he take? This must be a night of decision. And it was unusually dark.

Although he only stood there by the wall for about three minutes it seemed to him a long time. Then the music in the café blared forth again with its invariable feverish violence, musical cayenne pepper to stir up the desires of the crowd, and he passed in through the open doorway.

As he did so a man in a burnous and hooded went by him swiftly and disappeared in the night. An odd gust of heat seemed to Noel to emanate from this man and instantly to die away as he vanished. And he thought of the phrase 'fire in his belly.' Of whom had that been said? Of some famous Englishman, surely. That hooded Arab must also surely have fire in his belly. Strong personality had seemed to be in that gust. Noel even felt as if he knew something of that man, whoever he was. He had never before had a similar experience in connection with anyone. It was physical, surely—the sensation of heat. And yet it seemed more than physical.

It died away, and he entered the courtyard.

First he went straight to the room of Aziza. But the door of it was shut. She was probably in the café, either dancing or sitting impassively by the musicians, her small soft hands folded in her lap, waiting till her turn came. He waited for a moment before the door, hesitating. Then he made up his mind to go to the Maréchale. He did not know what he would do when he got there, but he felt he must go. When Aziza had finished dancing she would surely come there to get her door key and to leave her jewelry. If only he knew enough Arabic to be able to talk to the Maréchale! As he walked he conned over in his mind the few sentences he had committed to memory.

While he passed along the courtyard he noticed that some of the women who were sitting before their lighted doorways and waiting for custom stared at him with smiling interest and began drawing their neighbours'

attention to him by signs and ejaculations in guttural voices. He felt hot with irritation and self-consciousness but strove to harden himself and went by, pretending not to notice them.

When—when would he be broken in thoroughly to the life and ways of the desert?

He came to the Maréchale's doorway. Would she be alone? Perhaps she had company. He stopped and looked in.

She had company.

Seated, as usual, clothed in a mass of draperies, on the divan at the end of her room beside the enormous bed with its bedstead of gaudily painted wood, decorated with a pile of false hair, with feathers, with jewels, with coins of gold, a small black pipe of keef in one hand, and a coffee cup in the other, she was talking to a thin lanky youth with a very small head on the top of a long lean neck, who sat on a low stool opposite to her, smoking a cigarette. The head of this youth was held slightly sideways. The long loose figure bent forward from the stool. And Noel heard a high, almost soprano voice uttering some Arabic words feebly, yet with an oddly piercing and thinly peevish sound.

What a voice! Noel felt a thrill of repulsion and disgust at the sound of it. He even thought of immediately slipping away without noise, but the Maréchale's keen, greedy eyes, which looked old with experience of men and fierce with desire of money, had seen him. And now she withdrew the keef pipe from her painted lips, stretched them in a smile that was meant to be gracious, and lifted her left hand in token of greeting.

He had to go in.

As he came away from the door the youth on the stool, who was a eunuch and worked for the prostitutes, turned his small wavering head and, seeing the Roumi, exposed some long yellow teeth in a hyena grin, at the same time getting up from his stool.

There was a look of understanding, even of intimacy, in his small, discontented, almost piteous eyes, which made Noel detest him at sight.

Noel took no notice of him, went up to the Maréchale, and said solemnly: "*Salaam 'aleikoum.*"

The Maréchale's head moved till the ostrich feathers on it trembled. She put down her keef pipe and clapped her hands. No one came. She looked suddenly wrathful and spoke angrily to the eunuch, who got up obsequiously from his stool and, throwing another sickly and knowing glance at Noel, shambled hastily out of the room.

Of course to get coffee. Noel was in for it now.

The Maréchale, again assuming her exaggerated smile, spoke, returning Noel's conventional greeting, and pointed an index finger at the stool just vacated by the eunuch. He was obliged to sit down on it. Having come uninvited, he could not go abruptly away. He must wait till the eunuch came back with the coffee which he didn't want, perhaps wait even until Aziza appeared from the dancing house to get the key of her chamber and deposit her jewels and coins with the Maréchale for the night.

When he had sat down, instead of the silence, awkward and, to him, painful, though probably not to the Maréchale, which he had expected, there came surprisingly a spate of unintelligible words, spoken almost with vehemence by lips that continued to smile. It seemed evident to Noel that, as is often the way of ignorant people addressing someone in a language they know he doesn't fully understand or doesn't understand at all, the

Maréchale expected, by vehemence and her own interest in the matter in hand and excitement, to force comprehension of what she was saying into the hearer's mind. She had either forgotten for the moment his small knowledge of Arabic or, if she had not forgotten it, ignored it in her eagerness and the fascination the matter she was dealing with exercised over her grasping mind.

Not a word that she said was understood by Noel, but he guessed what she was speaking about from the extraordinary change in her manner and the intensity of her speech. When he had been with her before she had shown a sort of majestic apathy, something of the weary dignity and aloofness of a desert empress conscious of importance that required no assertion. In this kingdom of the dancing prostitutes she ruled, and her empire was unquestioned. So does a great painted idol seem to rule on its pedestal, and she reminded Noel of an idol. But now her eyes, surrounded by kohl, gleamed with avarice, and she showed the vivacity that is peculiar to the gold digger who, like an animal, seems actually to scent money when it's near to her quivering fingers.

Not a word could Noel understand. Yet he understood, or believed he understood, her meaning. She was certainly talking of his proposition about Aziza and was telling him that she agreed to it. He was positive of that. But presently, soon, her manner suddenly changed, and the expression of her painted face entirely altered. Its excitement was replaced by a mysterious solemnity. She leaned forward on her divan, shook her towering head at him, put a finger to her lips, took it away, pointed to the doorway, and in a lowered voice that became almost a hoarse whisper spoke a long sentence. Again Noel did not understand her words, but again he believed that he grasped her meaning. She was surely enjoining silence on him about the bargain she thought they were making. Not to tell! They mustn't know! "No one must know but we two!" She looked like a withered conspirator as she fixed upon him her eyes in a would-be hypnotic stare.

He nodded to indicate assent. He had absolutely decided now that the horrid 'deal' must go through. Any doubts he had had left him in spite of the intense distaste which the Maréchale inspired in his whole being. The fascination of strangeness, of adventure, of mystery, that hung like a vapour in this African atmosphere, overpowered his British temperament, naïve, still almost boyish. He couldn't give it all up. He must go forward along the path he was just beginning to tread. He must acquiesce. Otherwise he would surely miss an amazing experience.

The Maréchale read him. She knew he was hers. And again the wide smile came on her lips. Again he nodded, and she bowed her portentous head.

Then the eunuch came in with the coffee, set it down, and entered into a confabulation with the Maréchale which Noel could not help realizing had reference of some kind to him. It seemed that the Maréchale was giving the creature some directions or commands to which he listened with a cunning obsequiousness, occasionally directing at Noel a look in which a horrid intimacy of understanding and a malignant envy seemed mingled. More than once, while replying to the Maréchale in his high peevish voice, instead of looking at her he looked all the time at Noel, as a vain man sometimes gazes into a mirror while carrying on a conversation. This irritated Noel almost beyond the bearing point. But at last the confabulation ended, and the eunuch, with a last horribly intimate glance at Noel, shambled out once more into the night.

When he had gone there was a silence, during which the Maréchale seemed to relapse into the weary and remote dignity noticed by Noel during his first meeting with her. They sipped the coffee. What more was coming? What was there to wait for? Aziza, only Aziza! She must eventually come to the Maréchale's room for her key. Wondering about the Maréchale's talk with the eunuch, it struck Noel that possibly he had been sent by the Maréchale to summon Aziza at once from the dancing house.

The Maréchale, who seemed totally unembarrassed by the silence which Noel, in his Englishness, found awkward, now concerned herself with her pipe which had gone out. She carefully inserted a very small amount of keef, which she shook out from a small dirty silver box, into the little ink-black bowl, lit it by means of a morsel of red-hot cinder, which she took with a pair of small pincers from the brazier burning in the corner by her divan, and smoked calmly for two or three minutes, always keeping her eyes fixed upon Noel. He had the feeling that she was considering something which had to do with him.

He lit a cigarette to keep the keef pipe company and tried to lose himself in abstraction, occasionally lifting his eyes from the floor to the enigmatic face of the Maréchale. Each time he did this he found her eyes fixed steadily upon him. He began to feel restive under her gaze, which he was conscious of when he didn't look at her. Was she trying to hypnotize him or what? He shifted uneasily on the hard little stool and at last began to think seriously of getting up and leaving her. He could wait for Aziza in the courtyard. She must pass through it to get her key and go to her room.

But possibly she would not be alone. He did not know that the eunuch had been sent by the Maréchale to warn her of what was in the wind.

At last he could bear the situation no longer, and he threw away the end of his cigarette and got up to go. But the Maréchale did not mean to allow this. When she had made up her mind about a thing she was a woman who took no chances. Perhaps she knew by long experience how changeable are the minds and the passions of men and judged an Englishman by her long knowledge of men of the desert. Her pose of a watchful idol was destroyed by Noel's abrupt movement. Her face changed. She leaned suddenly forward, uttered a long protesting exclamation, shook her head till the feathers on it trembled, held out two restraining hands, one of which still held the keef pipe.

*"Non! Non!"*

Noel was startled and stood before her, in doubt what to do.

She pointed imperatively towards the stool, made a gesture towards the door, which very expressively indicated someone coming in from the courtyard, though there was no one, and again ejaculated, *"Non! Non!"*

Feeling sure now that she meant to indicate that Aziza would soon come, and perhaps that the eunuch had been sent to fetch her, Noel sat down again, resigned to another period of silence. But having spoken the one word of French that she knew, the Maréchale, her eagerness suddenly returning, broke again into speech. This time, however, her voice was not insinuating, nor were her words spoken with smiling lips. On the contrary, her face, astonishingly expressive under all its paint, took on the hard look that may be seen on the face of an obstinate bargainer who means to give no ground to an opponent, and she spoke for two or three minutes emphatically, keeping her eyes glued on Noel in a browbeating gaze, as if daring him to misunderstand her. Again he did not understand a word that she said,

but again he was able to guess at her meaning and felt sure that his guess was right. He had no shadow of doubt that she was speaking of the money matters connected with Aziza's projected pilgrimage for the summer to Tunis. This, indeed, was the fact. She was stating her—or was it Aziza's?—terms for a summer in Tunis, with a lucidity and minuteness worthy of an accomplished financier. And somehow Noel did understand to some extent that the money question was on the carpet and was all-important to her. She tried to help his comprehension by pantomime. With sordid ingenuity, her eyes now glittering with expectation of riches, she pointed to Noel's pockets and made the motions of a man emptying money out of them on to the coffee table. Then she spread out her hands, as if over the money, and seemed to be counting the coins. Her lips moved. Now and again she glanced up and sent a fierce questioning glance to Noel that seemed to say, "Do you understand?" And he, understanding and with a sick feeling about his heart, nodded his head and loudly ejaculated, "*Na'am!*" Then she smiled with abominable amiability and presently, as if in an ecstasy of satisfaction, leaned suddenly far forward over the coffee table, stretched out two clawlike hands, and patted Noel's cheeks with them.

She had just done this, and Noel was trying to govern his almost overpowering inclination to shrink away from the dry touch of her fingers, when he heard a noise behind him and, looking round, saw Aziza coming in with the eunuch.

When Noel saw her he felt a sudden sensation of relief so great that it quivered all through him. Here was extreme youth, painted, certainly, and bedizened. But through all the trappings and beneath the gold coins and the jewelry and the star-spangled veils youth asserted its shining power, its enticing and almost irresistible charm. In fact, it defied its adornments and seemed silently to assert, 'I should be even more desirable without all this.'

He sprang up from his stool. The Maréchale uttered a few rather hoarse and commanding words. Aziza left the doorway, near which she had paused submissively, and came gently forward to the divan, making scarcely any noise with her small dancing feet, above which, round her delicate ankles, the silver circles clinked softly.

And then began a scene which marked for Noel the gulf dividing him from the women of the desert. While the eunuch was still in the room near the doorway and Noel on his feet by the coffee table the Maréchale began talking in a low intimate voice to Aziza, who listened with evidently devout attention. Noel, of course, did not understand what she said, and she neither looked at nor made any gesture towards him. He might not have been there for all the notice she took of him. Yet he knew she must be speaking about him and telling Aziza of the bargain which concerned her and giving her directions about the future. And all this with total indifference to the patient presence of the man implicated.

And Aziza listened to all that was said. By her impassive expression and unwavering eyes, always fixed on the Maréchale, Noel gathered that she had blotted him out. And yet the whole thing, all that was being said, all that had been arranged without words from him, all that was being planned for the future, depended entirely on him. These women of the desert had at moments a power of indifference to the presence and observation and feelings of men that almost stupefied Noel.

And all the time, just behind him, the eunuch, who worked for the women, stood by the doorway, waiting. For what? What had he to do with all this? He must apparently be expectant of something with which he would be concerned. But at any rate he could not possibly hear what the Maréchale said from where he stood, for she kept her voice, occasionally interrupted by the short cough of the keef smoker, low as if with intention and never once looked in his direction. He, too, was for the moment a dummy, companion to Noel. The girl and the woman were entirely concerned with each other.

After that episode Noel never quite forgot the gulf that divides the sexes.

But at last the Maréchale had said all she wanted to say, and Aziza had accepted all that she was told to accept, and the women again became conscious that the dummies had men's blood inside them. Aziza glanced at Noel, and there was a shine in her eyes, something in them that he had not seen till that night. She went away behind the thin curtain, beyond the great bed, and presently came back without her jewels and coins, the big door key of her room in her hand. And then she stretched out an arm to Noel and, like a child, gently pulled at his arm. And he made his solemn bow to the Maréchale and went out with Aziza to the courtyard. The eunuch stretched his lips in his sickly smile as Noel passed him, but Noel took no notice. Evidently the creature still had something to do for the Maréchale, though Noel could not imagine what it was.

As he stepped into the court he felt that his fate was decided. His summer would be passed at Sidi Bou Saïd and Aziza would be near him in Tunis. Every day he would see her.

He felt very strange, almost like one walking in the labyrinth of a dream. But he felt very happy.

Next morning when, after his walk at dawn in the marvellous early air of the desert, he came into the camp and gave Taha a call for his breakfast, he was still happy. His body felt braced up, his mind full of restless anticipation. No fear of the future haunted him.

Now to arrange about the money transaction with the Maréchale. He would call in Sabatier's help for that. And immediately after breakfast he wrote the following note to him.

DEAR SABATIER,

*I am relying on your good friendship and am coming to you again for help on account of my ignorance of the language here, though really I'm getting forward a little with it. Last night I saw the Maréchale. She talked to me with great energy. I couldn't understand her words, but I am convinced I divined her meaning, and that it was what you suggested it would be. But now can you go to the trouble of finding out if I'm right in my supposition and, if so, what I must do? I am ready to do what is wanted at once. But how? Not by cheque, I imagine. I suppose I can, and must, trust to a double promise given only by word. In the one case, Aziza's, I feel that I can. And I'm ready to run the risk. I hope it's the same with the Maréchale. If you wish me to be with you when the matter is clinched I will come at any time. It will all be strictly private, of course. I'm sending this by Taha, who will wait for an answer. Please accept my gratitude.*

*Yours very sincerely,*  
NOEL HERRIOT.

He sent Taha off at once with this note to the city and told him to wait for an answer. Then he took his Arabic book and set off on foot to the weir in the oasis.

When he came back to the camp he looked for Taha, but only Amar was there, preparing his lunch.

Lunch over, he waited for a while rather anxiously, but as Taha didn't turn up he determined to govern his impatience and went into his tent to have his usual siesta. As his night had been rather disturbed, and he had left the Ouled Nails' courtyard at dawn to walk back to the camp, directly he lay down on his camp bed he fell asleep.

He slept deeply for over an hour and when he woke up he lay for some time in a drowsy condition. The noise of a galloping horse approaching the tent roused him fully, and he jumped up and, with his thick hair all rough from the pillow, looked out to see who was coming. He hoped and was not deceived. It was Sabatier.

"I had your note, but not directly. I was out seeing a squad being knocked into shape. And then had to lunch, see to one or two things, and have a word with the Maréchale."

"You've seen her?"

"Yes."

"Let me give you a drink."

"I wish you would."

"Amar!"

"Moosoo?"

"Whisky soda."

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

"Sit down here, Sabatier. How good of you to come! What did the Maréchale say?"

"A great deal. Her majestic silences are badly matched by her volubility when any question of personal interest arises to vitalize her. The lady is really phenomenal, an African portent. How I wish you knew the language and could study her labyrinthine mind. She is a female Napoleon of prostitutes. Now for a drink!"

When he had put his glass down he lit his pipe. There was something very intimate and friendly in his manner, and Noel felt that he liked him more and more with each fresh meeting. He was an unself-conscious original completely unconcerned about his own charm.

"And she will never be caged in another Saint Helena. Defeat upon the battlefield cannot be known by her."

"Do you mean that she will always get what she wants?" said Noel rather uncomfortably.

"Surely! But now for your case. You divined correctly what she was up to with you the other night. She *was* recapitulating"—he paused for a second, as if considering what phrase to select, then went on with a faint smile—"Aziza's terms and agreeing that, if you consented to them, things can be as you wish."

"I thought so! I felt sure of it! Then it's all right. You told me what they were. She just repeated them?"

"I suppose so. She told me she had. And she sang your praises."

"Oh, did she?" said Noel rather doubtfully, as if uncertain whether this was a compliment.

"She thinks you a very beautiful young man and is enormously in your favour."



"Because of the money, I suppose."

"Isn't money at the bottom of almost every manifestation of human satisfaction?"

"I shouldn't like to think that," said Noel with resolution. "But of course with a woman like the Maréchale one couldn't expect anything else, I suppose. But—but the terms were as before?"

"Yes. At one moment she did, of course, being African, attempt a considerable increase. But I refused on your behalf firmly."

"Thank you very much."

"And my influence prevailed, I'm happy to say."

"I'm glad. I shouldn't have cared to run to anything more."

"But the stipulations remain as before. The money must be paid over in advance. As soon as possible, in fact."

"I'm ready. But I wanted to ask you how."

"In hard cash. Or rather in paper money. But something that goes from hand to hand. These women don't understand cheques. They like best gold coins, as you know. But it can be managed in paper."

"Oh, yes. And the money will go to Aziza?"

"Some of it, at any rate. Probably a good deal."

His often remote though vivid eyes suddenly showed an acutely observant look.

"I've got a surprise for you."

"Yes?" said Noel anxiously.

"I'm not quite sure, but I'm almost sure, that Aziza is the Maréchale's child."

This unexpected statement struck on Noel's mind almost like a physical blow.

"The Maréchale's child!" he exclaimed with boyish dismay.

"I think so," said Sabatier imperturbably. "It's been whispered through the women's courtyard. But that might mean nothing. The Maréchale's behaviour throughout these proceedings on your behalf has made me believe it. She's concerned as a mother might well be for her daughter. After all, what does it matter? The family interest makes her attitude, if anything, more excusable. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps so," said Noel, but still with dismay in his voice.

He was mentally comparing Aziza's soft youth and strange—to him, romantic—beauty, with the dusky, portentous, and wrinkled majesty, solemn, hard, at moments greedily keen, of the crowned phenomenon on the divan by the painted bed. Could, in the terrible process of the fiend Time, Aziza ever come to something akin to that? For one wild moment he was almost inclined to go back from his bargain. Sabatier watched him with a look of half-melancholy interest which seemed to say in its silence, 'Poor humanity! How easily art thou troubled!'

"Let us leave it!" he said. "We shall never know. And what does it matter?"

"No, no! Of course it doesn't! But still—no, it doesn't! You are right."

"It's not too late to draw back, though a Rumi's word once given -- the Maréchale seems to think you gave it the other night."

"Yes, yes! I don't go back! And you think—you believe I can trust just to the Maréchale's word?"

Sabatier knocked out his pipe and laid it on the table.

"I don't know. What does one really *know* about these people? I like living among them. I am accustomed to them. I have found good qualities in some of them as I have found detestable qualities in many Europeans, including, by the way, a few of my own compatriots. (Let us be fair!) But the knowledge we white people gather as we go of the dark races seems to me to be strictly limited. And I believe that is partly what attracts men like me to them."

"I'm sure you are right there!" exclaimed Noel. "They lure you on by the mystery in them."

Sabatier smiled.

"Rather as the desert does. But so often beyond the indigo line of the far horizon one finds only another great stretch of sand. Well, now, before I go I suppose we had better talk business. That is, if you are still resolved to go through with it."

After an instant of silence Noel said:

"Yes, I've quite decided."

Absurdly, perhaps, Noel felt a sense of dismay at the suggestion that Aziza might be, probably indeed was, the child of the Maréchale. Till now he had never bothered about her origin, and never connected her with any family life, had never mentally 'placed' her in the bosom of any domesticity. She must have had a mother and a father, of course. But neither had ever occurred to his mind even as a shadowy phantom. She had come into his life as a detached dancing mystery and remained in it as a youthful enchantress, to whom he was violently attached physically without understanding her.

And now a possible mother presented herself, portentous, managing, greedy, and perhaps prematurely aged—Noel never knew the Maréchale's age—by a long life of licentiousness. Aziza's mother?

And who—what—had been her father?

His mind roved among men of North Africa. Surely her father could not have been very dark, decidedly not a black man. Aziza's skin was not dark. It was not a clean ivory white. But it was silky and soft with a sort of creamy brown tinge. As to the Maréchale, the impression she gave in her war paint was that she was more than dusky *underneath*.

Ugh! He shuddered as he thought of her. He would not think of her as Aziza's mother. As Sabatier had said, they were never likely to know the secret of that maternity, so why bother about it? But we are all on the way. And if Aziza was on the way to becoming like the Maréchale!

A vision of the years spread out before Noel. How long would this connection, as yet only in the bud, with Aziza last? He supposed it would be but transitory. But so were all things in the life of a man. Yet when a man loves he does not stare at the end of his love but has usually premonitions of an imagined eternity. This suggestion of Sabatier's suddenly made Noel see this strange adventure as a thing without any possibility of permanence. It was surely too queer to contain any deepening power, any power of growth or crescendo. And yet here he was working towards—more, not satisfied yet, to say nothing of sated. He was aiming at progression beyond the mere physical to things mental and even affectional. He had desires of a sower, ambitious of scattering seed through the long summer months, the long heats of Africa.

Was she the Maréchale's child? Did that perhaps account for the

Maréchale's great money interest in this affair? He began to feel like one increasingly involved in mystery but compelled to go onward, compelled by desire of the body but also by desire of the mind. For he was captured by an immense curiosity and always haunted by a tingling sense of romance. He was not only living in Africa as any traveller may live but was also beginning to take an active part in genuine African life. That was wonderful. That was worth while.

With intensity he returned to his Arabic book. With almost fury he studied and memorized and practised speaking Arabic with Taha. And he put the thought of the Maréchale as mother out of his mind. He would never know the truth about her and Aziza. And it didn't matter. All that mattered and that was going to matter much more was his relation to Aziza.

The money affair was arranged. The money in paper was paid to Noel by the Algiers bank. He notified Sabatier, who said that they had better go together to the Maréchale to conclude the affair. Noel should be there in person when the money was handed over, and he, Sabatier, would be go-between and witness. Noel had lost the faint distrust which had prompted him to ask Sabatier in the tent whether he believed that the word of an Ouled Nail, or of two Ouled Nails, could be taken as binding. Surely a long connection with him must be materially advantageous to such a girl as Aziza. He was not very rich. But certainly they must think him very rich. To them he must represent money. All natives of Africa think English travellers rich. Otherwise how could they travel?

The Maréchale had greedy and grasping hands. He felt sure that she would not easily let him go. It wasn't a pretty thought. But he didn't see the Maréchale in Aziza. She seemed to have the lighthearted indifference of her extreme youth about what was obviously of enormous importance in the eyes of the Maréchale. Noel began to see her as merely a victim of tribal life and tribal tradition. But not as an unhappy victim. That, perhaps, in a way made the tragedy essentially greater. But not for her personally. She was not one who, knowing better, was suffering in her knowledge. No; she took things as they came, like one naturally dedicated to the life of an Ouled Nail dancer. That was almost incredible to Noel still. But it was so. She was certainly not unhappy.

But he would make her much happier. It did not occur to him that by giving her some of his appreciation of life, some of his outlook on things, if that were possible, he might sow in her the seeds of an unhappiness of which as yet she had no conception.

On the day decided upon between Sabatier and Noel for the settlement with the Maréchale two things happened.

A note from Madame de Pleunier enclosing a letter from Sir Tom—otherwise Sir Thomas Challoner—told Noel that the matter of his house at Sidi Bou Said was settled and that it would be his at the rent agreed upon from the first of May to the first of the following November. The furniture and bedding, etc., would be left in order and ready for him. Sir Tom would also leave his gardener and his cook, the gardener's wife, on board wages. They would 'go' with the house. And payment for their services was included in the rent.

In her friendly note Madame de Pleunier advised Noel to agree to all this and asked him to come and see her any afternoon after five. She would be going to Paris probably early in April, and certainly before the end of that month, and they would not meet again till the autumn came. She

wanted to talk things over with him and to give him a little more information about Sidi Bou Said and Tunis.

That was one thing.

The other event that made the day slightly unusual was a message from Bernard, brought by Taha from the city where he had gone to the market.

In reading Madame de Pleunier's note, Noel was struck by the insistence with which she returned to the fact of her intention to spend all the summer in France. She had more than once told him that and dwelt on it, and now again she reiterated it, as if wishing to impress it upon him.

Why?

He could not help wondering, for why should it interest him specially? What had it to do with him? It seemed that always she went to France for the summer. That was her habit. Though once, apparently because her friends of the Arab palace at Sidi Bou Said had offered her the loan of it, she had ventured on one summer in Africa and apparently had enjoyed it. But she had not repeated the experience and evidently did not intend to. He was glad of that and was glad that she had again stated it to him. It would have been extremely unpleasant and awkward for him to have Madame de Pleunier almost next door to him at Sidi Bou Said and Aziza installed as his mistress in Tunis. That would be a complication that he was quite unfitted to deal with. Thinking of that, suddenly he wondered whether somehow Madame de Pleunier had acquired knowledge of his strange plan for the summer and insisted on the fact that she would be far away in France in order that his mind might be quite at ease in the certainty that his freedom would not be interfered with.

His ignorance of the psychology of women was evidenced by this preposterous moment of wonder. A man of the world would not have had it. And even Noel almost immediately dismissed it from his mind as not possible. For after his experience with her in the dancing house, where she had expressed her contempt for the dancing of the Ouled Nails and her wonder that men could be attracted by them, he felt convinced that if she knew about him and Aziza she would be disgusted at his folly and would lose all interest in him, ranking him as just another of the fools whom a Frenchwoman could only despise.

Still his surprise at her insistence on her speedy departure to France and permanence there during the whole of the summer remained with him.

But there was so much in women that he did not understand, and Madame de Pleunier, an undoubtedly complex woman, was decidedly an enigma to him. When he had been with her he had often been wondering about her. He had wondered about her relation with her husband, about her friendship with Sabatier, about her apparent interest in himself and his doings, had wondered even about how much she had known exactly of the episode of Bernard and the Bedouin.

The message brought by Taha from Bernard was to the effect that Bernard had finished the work he had undertaken in Touggourt and meant to leave almost immediately for his home in Bou Saada. He didn't want to go without seeing Noel to say *au revoir*. Would Noel come to a farewell meal in his house either that night or on the following night? He would send over a servant to the camp in the afternoon for an answer. He might have something to show Noel. He was not inviting anyone else.

This second message surprised Noel and woke in him a feeling akin to

contrition : really an unnecessary feeling, but he had it, being a sensitive fellow. Bernard had been his first acquaintance in Touggourt, had been friendly and hospitable, had introduced him to the few people whom he now knew, had even taken the trouble to utter a warning to him. He had expected that Bernard would be his chief friend in the belly of the desert, but it seemed now as if that place had been taken by Sabatier. Of course there was no reason why Bernard should mind that, and Noel felt almost sure that he didn't mind it. Of course not ! But Noel's feeling of contrition led him to return a particularly warm acceptance of Bernard's hospitable invitation for the following evening.

He decided to see Madame de Pleunier before going to Bernard.

'My day to-morrow will be quite crowded up !' he said to himself with a feeling of strong anticipation.

But now for the final settlement with the Maréchale !

He had asked Sabatier to make a condition on his behalf about that. The condition was that Aziza must be present at it as it concerned her future. He insisted on that. He felt he had a right to insist as such a large sum of money was coming from him. These money matters ! How ugly they were ! But almost directly now they would be finally finished and done with, and he would put them out of his mind. He was sure Aziza had had nothing to do with them. The whole arrangement had evidently been conceived and carried out by the Maréchale. Was she Aziza's mother ? He would look at her with new and more searching eyes when he saw her again.

When night fell and the innumerable stars shone out over the desert Noel set off alone to the city. As usual Taha, who certainly suspected that something important was afoot, wanted to come with him, but Noel brusquely negatived the suggestion.

"You must stay in the camp with Amar. Now don't argue about it. That's my order. Understand ?"

As Taha, lifting a lip corner, showed a pointed side tooth and looked very sulky, Noel added :

"I mean to spend all the summer in North Africa. If you wish to remain in my service—I don't promise it, mind !—you must do as I tell you without attempting to question it. Otherwise I shall look out for another servant."

This statement, followed by a threat, brought Taha at once to his senses. An obsequious smile changed his mouth, and he said submissively :

"I doin always what you tellin me, sir. I only wantin to please you."

Noel nodded and bade him good night. As he walked away towards the few lights that showed faintly across the flat he pressed a hand against his left breast. There, in an inner pocket, fastened with a button, was lodged a fat wad of bank notes, the tribute to be paid to Aziza. Or was it the tribute to be paid for Aziza ? As he strode on, a thick stick with lead at the bottom grasped in his right hand, pursued by the sound of the barking of dogs, which came to him also in the dark distance from the city, he resolved to give it himself into the soft little hands of Aziza. The Maréchale might stretch out her greedy paws. He would ignore them.

The money was not for her.

If one of the wandering Arabs who frequented the outskirts of the city by night knew what the Roumi carried against his left breast ! Noel gripped his stick more firmly and was glad he had his revolver with him.

For an instant his mind went to Upper Green. If his former parishioners could see him now striding alone through the night! If they could be acquainted with the nature of his errand! How extraordinary, how amazing were the contrasts that were woven into the skein of one humble human life! How almost abominably interesting life was! No doubt it was very absurd of him, but the fact must be stated, Noel felt very wonderful as he hurried along. And what a mercy it is that a man can at moments feel wonderful.

A remarkable deviation from custom took place that night in the court of the Ouled Naïls. A conclave was held in the room of the Maréchale at a comparatively early hour behind a stout door of palmwood which was closely shut. And the hyena-like eunuch stood on guard before it, with orders not to let anyone pass. Any dancing girl who wished to deposit her jewels and coins or to withdraw her door key from custody must wait. Such was the command of the Maréchale.

The inhabitants of the court were greatly excited and full of curiosity. But no information was vouchsafed to them. They did know something, however. They had seen three people enter the Maréchale's chamber, Aziza and two Roumis, Noel and Sabatier. Then the palmwood door had been shut and the women were left in suspense, chattering before their lit-up doorways, like a lot of macaws on their perches. Only those who were dancing that night were ignorant that the night was exceptional. If the door remained shut and the eunuch on guard they would know when they came for their keys and would join in the chatter. The men who frequented the courtyard that night, some of whom were perforce kept waiting by the women they desired, did not chatter but murmured in guttural voices deep in their beards and stared at the shut door from under their hoods. They did not show the excitement of the women but only a frowning dissatisfaction. Probably they were murmuring against the Maréchale for showing such indifference to her obvious duty as appointed guardian of the keys. Perhaps they were also expressing desert opinion about the behaviour of Roumis who exacted from her such a hitherto unknown departure from protocol.

Presently two of them, after prolonged conversation always carried on in low and deep voices, voices that seemed submerged in their throats, walked slowly, with swinging burnouses, across the court to the eunuch and questioned him. He replied in his high peevish voice, accompanying his remarks with feeble unfinished gestures of his thin dirty hands. After a pause they withdrew in growling irritation, having, however, not summoned up sufficient courage to strike a blow on the palmwood door. Evidently the Maréchale had power over the desert men as well as over the Ouled Nail women.

Inside her room the usual ceremony was being scrupulously observed. No haste must be shown over such an extremely important matter as was now in hand.

An extra stool had been provided and placed before the divan and the coffee table which stood between the Maréchale and her visitors. Aziza, it seemed, was to remain through the interview standing. Before they came into the room Sabatier had had a talk to Noel on their way to the dancing house and had asked him to leave everything in his hands.

"I have never done anything quite like this before," he explained with his usual calm and unconcerned seriousness. "But I know in a general way exactly how to deal with these people. Time has little or no meaning

for them. They must never be hurried. If they want to hurry you at times over money, that's their affair. But this is a fixed proposition. The Maréchale knows that the thing will go through. She will certainly take her time over it, not yours, and will probably show complete indifference about it now that it has come to the point, however energetic she was when she was putting it through. All that will be acting. Don't show any impatience."

"I won't!" said Noel firmly. "I'll leave myself in your hands."

"And in hers," said Sabatier with his faint half-melancholy, half-humorous smile. "It will begin, of course, as it invariably does, with coffee, smoking, compliments, and a few remarks of no meaning expressed in flowery language, and will gradually come to the money business."

"I mean to give the money personally into Aziza's hands," said Noel with a decision that was almost feverish.

Sabatier raised his eyebrows.

"Really, I'm determined on that."

Sabatier lowered his eyebrows and said:

"Very well."

They came to the eunuch, who let them in with his usual obsequious familiarity and carefully shut the door behind them.

"Why is that beastly fellow here?" whispered Noel.

"To keep out the women who may come for their keys."

"What will they do?"

"Wait, I suppose."

As they went forward to the divan Aziza, who was standing close to it, not in her dancing attire but in a quite simple dress of spangled muslin, sent a long glance to Noel and moved back to the bottom of the big bed, where she paused, holding one of the painted bedposts with her left hand. For the first time Noel believed he saw an expression of excitement in her eyes as they met his. Yes, she was excited. This must mean a great deal to her. It was rousing her out of her feathery girlishness. He seemed to see a woman in her, and something in him echoed her excitement. At that moment he felt that if she woke up to strong feeling for him he would go absolutely crazy about her. He tried to sink his eyes into hers in the diving glance of a lover. She continued to look at him fixedly, always holding the bedpost. What was she saying to him? He believed she was thanking him. She was grateful to him for what he was going to do. She was silently giving herself to him for the summer.

He made a great effort, withdrew his eyes, and began to attend to the Maréchale.

She showed no excitement. On the contrary, a sort of moth-eaten indifference seemed to brood over her, and she looked more like an idol than ever. There was no indication in her manner or bearing that this was a very important moment, one of the most important she had known in her long career. Noel could not believe that such a large sum of money as a hundred and fifty pounds was often handed over by a Rouni, or by any man, in that dimly lit chamber of pleasure, in which now a strong smell of incense arose and hung on the air above a small brass receptacle with a cover, in which holes were pierced for the insertion of the scent-giving sticks.

Sabatier uttered the conventional greeting, and the Maréchale replied. Then suddenly feeling self-conscious, Noel in his turn greeted the lady, and

once more she made answer. After this Sabatier and Noel took their seats on the two stools in front of the coffee table, and with sudden violence the Maréchale clapped her hands for the coffee. They made a dry angry sound, which was followed by silence.

Noel tingled all over. Now he could not see Aziza, who was standing behind him and who made no movement, but he felt her presence intensely. She seemed to be throwing out feeling which communicated itself strongly to him.

After two or three minutes of profound silence, which Sabatier endured with an air of perfect indifference quite Oriental, a Negress brought in coffee and three cups. Evidently Aziza was not to take part in the drinking of it. This made Noel feel angry. But he tried to imitate Sabatier's calm composure and accepted his cup with a slight, quite unnecessary inclination of the head to the Maréchale. The coffee was gently sipped. The cups, of course, were very small and the coffee was thick and exceedingly sweet. Noel, restless and nervous, finished his before the Maréchale and Sabatier had disposed of theirs and immediately lit a cigarette. He noticed that Sabatier glanced at him and wondered whether he had done the wrong thing. Perhaps he should have waited or have offered his case to the Maréchale. He made a movement to hold it out to her, but as he did so she produced her little black pipe with the long stem and proceeded to fill it with a morsel of keef, which she then lit from the brazier, at the same time sounding the small dry cough which he had begun to connect with keef. Sabatier followed her example and lit his pipe. And Noel realized that probably he had been impolite. He should have waited as Sabatier had. He felt like a guest who had made a social mistake and reddened.

Then all three of them smoked, still keeping their silence.

At last the Maréchale spoke, addressing herself to Sabatier.

She spoke slowly and at some length. Sabatier answered, also slowly, and there was a short conversation between them. When it was over Sabatier turned to Noel and said to him in French, though hitherto he had always spoken to Noel in his excellent English :

*"Elle me demande si nous allons lui donner l'argent."*

*"Je l'ai ici avec moi,"* replied Noel, at the same time touching the wad in the inner pocket of his jacket.

*"Alors, elle est prête à le recevoir."*

"Please let me speak in English," said Noel, summoning up his resolution. "I feel more natural in English."

"English seems to make her suspicious," said Sabatier calmly in French. "But if you like I'll tell her you prefer to speak your own language just now."

"What is she suspicious of?" said Noel, still in English, trying not to show his impatience and nervous irritation, and still feeling Aziza behind him.

"Everything, I expect. But I'll explain to her."

And he spoke again to the Maréchale, who, after a pause, slightly moved her towering head.

"That will do," then said Sabatier to Noel. "You had better produce the money."

"I will. But I must insist on giving it to Aziza."

The Maréchale now evidently began to suspect that some plot was being hatched against her, for she suddenly lost her air of indifference and looked



from Sabatier to Noel with piercingly keen enquiry, at the same time leaning forward on the divan till her bust projected over the coffee table.

"The money is for Aziza, and I must and will give it to her," said Noel.

After saying this he turned his head sharply to look at Aziza and surprised her in an attitude that suggested to him absorbed expectation. She had partially extended her arms and held her hands palm upwards, as if ready to receive something in them, and her face had an expression of pleading eagerness, like that of a child kept waiting for a cake that nevertheless it expects to be given.

This attitude and expression made Noel lose all his self-consciousness. He got up from his stool, thrust his hand inside his jacket, pulled out the fat wad of notes, which were enclosed in a thick envelope and sealed, and gave it to Aziza, at the same time exclaiming in English :

"There !"

Aziza's little hands closed down on the envelope with force, and she uttered a small cry, almost like the cry of a bird, her face beaming with smiles of exultation and joy.

What she would have done then with the envelope if no one had interfered with her Noel never knew. She held it against her childish breast and made a movement as if she was about to turn and run out. But someone did interfere with her. The Maréchale reared herself up from the divan with surprising agility, moved violently forward, oversetting the cups on the coffee table and the stool Noel had sat on, thrust him out of the way with animal roughness, reached Aziza, and snatched the envelope out of her hands, at the same time letting loose a torrent of Arabic.

"Don't interfere ! Do nothing !" said the voice of Sabatier behind Noel in English. "Let her count the money. That's what she wants to do."

Noel, who had instinctively lifted his arms to protect Aziza from violence, let them drop to his sides. He expected some demonstration from Aziza, a flood of tears, perhaps, or at best an outburst of protest and lamentation. But none came. She let the storm break over her with a slave's submission. The smiles left her face, but her eyes were fixed on the envelope, tearless eyes full of grim attention. All that mattered to her evidently just then was what would become of the envelope. If she was attacked in words and insulted before the Roumis that did not matter.

With the abruptness that had marked its beginning the violence of the Maréchale ceased. Her face became rigid and severe, but dignified almost. She beckoned to Aziza to accompany her and returned to the divan. There she made Aziza sit beside her close to the oil lamp with a crude blue glass globe which lit the room and spoke a few words to her in a low voice. All this was done by the two women with complete indifference to the presence of Noel and Sabatier. They might not have been in the room, and perhaps the women had forgotten that they were in it. The Maréchale drew what looked to Noel like a tiny dagger from the drapery over her breast, kicked out a foot sharply, and knocked away from her one of the coffee cups that had fallen to the floor, slit up the envelope, breaking the seals, and fished out the fat wad of bank notes.

"Does she understand them ?" Noel whispered to Sabatier.

Sabatier nodded and signed to Noel to hold his tongue, at the same time smiling faintly and half closing his eyes. Noel saw that he was thoroughly enjoying this exhibition of feminine *mœurs* in the desert and didn't want his enjoyment to be interfered with.

With an absorbed concentration, in which there was passion, the Maréchale and Aziza leaned together in the lamplight over the divan, as very slowly and meticulously the Maréchale counted out the notes one by one, moving her lips as she did so, and evidently making a calculation. The money was in hundred-franc notes. And the counting took a long time.

Noel watched note after note being laid down and reckoned. Would the process never end? When would Aziza remember that he was in the room? She had certainly forgotten it now, as she leaned forward, staring at the notes as the Maréchale slowly, very slowly, counted them out.

At last, however, the counting fingers came to the end of their task, and the only remaining note was placed on the pile.

'Now,' thought Noel with fierce impatience, 'Aziza will remember I'm here, and we can get away out of this cursed room and perhaps take the money with us. Or—no—see it locked safely up with Aziza's jewels.'

But, no! The Maréchale was not satisfied, and the counting began all over again, with Aziza watching, absorbed.

All this time Noel was standing. His overthrown stool still lay on the floor by the kicked-away cup.

His whole body tingled with desperate impatience, but with an effort he forced himself to remain still and be patient, while once more note after note was laid one on the top of the other, to the accompaniment of whispering lips. Meanwhile Sabatier sat calmly watching the process that seemed everlasting. He was not disturbed. But he was not in love with Aziza. And he had acquired through long years of desert life the power of stillness and mental inertia, or mental dominion, that is given to man by the desert.

At last the second pile was completed, and Aziza turned her eyes from it to the Maréchale, who sat perfectly still for a moment in a brooding attitude, her fingers still hovering over the money as if bewitched by it.

This prolonged pause, with 'nothing doing', was too much for Noel's endurance.

"What are we waiting for now? I can't stand much more of this!" he said with irresistible bitterness, such as he had never felt before and had not known he could feel. "I want to get out of this beastly room."

"Things go slowly in Africa—or too fast," said Sabatier calmly.

And he began to talk to the Maréchale, while Aziza sat always with her eyes fixed on the money, on which now the Maréchale laid a possessive hand.

'But Aziza shall have it!' Noel said to himself with stern resolution.

"Tell her Aziza must have it or I'll take it away," he suddenly interpolated in the midst of Sabatier's talk. "I swear I'll take it away, and now, this very moment."

There was a pause. Both women looked up as if startled.

"Tell them, please!" exclaimed Noel. "I wish them to know, both of them."

The stern sound of his voice seemed to impress the Maréchale, who looked at Sabatier as if to ask for an explanation, while Aziza's eyes followed hers.

Sabatier spoke again in Arabic with resolution, at the same time pointing to Aziza. Noel was prepared for resistance on the part of the Maréchale, but again he had a surprise. These Ouled Nails were full of the unexpected. For after waiting a moment as if in thought and looking again at the money, the Maréchale's face broke up into smiles, which became almost grins, and she nodded her head several times, looking at Noel. Evidently she was

consenting. Feeling relieved, he returned her smiles and also nodded his head in imitation of hers. They behaved like two mandarins while Aziza, still serious, watched them.

"She agrees," said Sabatier, "and will keep the money safe for Aziza. She promises that."

He spoke to the Maréchale, who answered with animation.

"She promises. She swears it—in her way, of course."

"Very well!" said Noel, now keeping his head still and again looking very serious. "Then I suppose we can go. I'm very grateful to you, Sabatier. I shan't forget this."

"I hope it's all right. But, as I told you, I advise you, if any rumour of this should get about outside the court here and come to your ears, to deny that there is any truth in it. Laugh at it! That's my advice."

Noel knew, when Sabatier said that, he was thinking of Madame de Pleunier.

"I'm sure no one knows of it," he answered.

And he really believed what he said.

He bade a dignified farewell to the Maréchale, who was now all smiles and ejaculations in Arabic, and went out of the room with Sabatier.

But outside in the night he waited, ignoring the eunuch, who was still there with several impatient dancing girls, near whom were some waiting men.

Sabatier stood by him, then said :

"I'll leave you now. If later on you want a bed you've only got to come to my place. You can knock up Larbi at any time of the night. He sleeps near the door."

He held out his hand.

"Well, for good or ill, it's done now."

Noel grasped his hand, feeling that it really was the hand of a friend.

"Yes, it's done now, and I'm glad. I don't know how to thank you. Aziza will have the money?"

"It seems so."

"She can't be the daughter of that woman. I'll never believe it."

"Sometimes, perhaps, our unbeliefs are the most precious things we have," said Sabatier.

And he went away, leaving Noel to think over that among the dancing girls.

Noel bore with their staring eyes, their whispers, their coquettish gestures, and lascivious laughter for two or three minutes. Then he could bear it no longer, though he tried to harden himself to it and said to himself, 'I don't care what they think, what they do.' And he went a little way into the courtyard and waited there, stared at by men only. He didn't mind that so much. But it seemed to him a very long time before Aziza came out, holding her key. She stopped and spoke to the eunuch, who replied at considerable length with many wavering gestures. Then he entered the Maréchale's room, followed by the impatient girls who had been waiting for the keys of their chambers. Noel wondered why he had gone in. He hated the creature and hated his being, as he seemed to be, mixed up in the Maréchale's private affairs. What had he said to Aziza and what had she said to him? Now two more girls had arrived, and she was talking to them. Noel's impatience became so acute and his nervous irritation so strong that he felt as if he were on the verge of a brain storm and might do

something savage in a moment if those girls did not go and leave Aziza alone. Was she telling them what had occurred? Was she relating her triumph? He could stand it no longer and he hurried forward, mounted to where the three girls were standing, pushed his way to Aziza, and laid a hand on her wrist.

She looked startled for an instant, and the expression in her eyes showed apprehension. Then she saw who it was and showed her even little teeth in a smile that stirred the blood roused in Noel's heart.

"*Venez !*" he said in a loud voice.

Then he turned to the staring prostitutes and said, almost shouted, something at them. He never knew what it was. They shrank away, hardly frightened, but seeing that it was wise to leave Aziza alone with such a determined lover.

And he drew her away possessively towards her room, feeling that now at last she was his.

Noel did not knock on Sabatier's door and wake Larbi that night, and the sun was up over the desert when he returned to the camp an hour later than usual, feeling recklessly happy, but also with a new sensation of peace and stability in his heart. As he passed quickly across the big market-place he was seen by the Pleunier page boy, Hassan, but did not see him. He was deeply thinking about the future and thinking over the past. His memories of the night just over were mingled, black and white, contrasting threads in the skein of life. He had suffered in the room of the Maréchale. The ugliness of the money matter, the absorbed concentration of the two women upon it, a concentration which had rendered them evidently unconscious for moments of his presence and Sabatier's in the room, had filled him with repugnance. But this repugnance had been directed mainly upon the Maréchale. Aziza was only a child still, and he could forgive her. The money to her was as the new toy to a child. He thought of her birth and upbringing, the life she was beginning to lead. How could she be otherwise than she was? How wrong and absurd it would be to expect too much of her, virtues such as one looks for and demands for the civilized who have led what are often called 'sheltered' lives! But now she was going to have a chance. He was going to give her a chance. In the summer-time, when he had taken her away from the dancing house and the degradation which she couldn't yet see as degradation, he could gradually open her eyes to better things, would make her see life in a different way. Not, of course, in his former way! He had lived a narrow life of austerity as she was now living a narrow life of license. That was how he thought of it as he walked to the camp. But he would teach her—oh, there was much he would teach when he had her in Tunis all to himself! Thinking of that, he was happy, looking forward. He had to release her from so much that he hated. In the Maréchale's room now and then he had seen a moral, never a physical, resemblance between her and the Maréchale. In her concentration on money specially. That had joined them together dreadfully. She might be the Maréchale's child. More than once he had feared that she was. But even so, at her youthful age she might be influenced, might be corrected, guided, might have her eyes opened on scenes she had never known or conceived of.

Something of the English clergyman was alive in Noel when this passed through his mind. Fragments of his ecclesiasticism still hung about him

in spite of the way he was now living, of what he had just been doing, of all he was looking forward to. Yet he was not surprised at himself, did not give way to self-criticism. He was too intent on and eager about the future.

That future was settled now. A wonderfully interesting and romantic summer lay before him. Only a very few weeks and he would be settled in Sir Tom's house looking over the gates of Africa, and Aziza would be in Tunis la Blanche, away from the Ouled Nails and belonging to him. An absolutely radiant feeling took possession of him as he realized it all, and he entered the camp, singing.

Hearing the sound of the lusty voice, Taha came out of the servants' tent looking amazed, but received no explanation.

"Breakfast, Taha! Breakfast! And then I shall go for a ride!"

At that moment Noel felt strong and as if his health had been perfectly mended already by his sojourn in Africa. It was glorious to feel so well as one drank in that life-giving air. How mad it would be to go back to humid England even in summer. But he wasn't going—he wasn't going!

In the afternoon he told Taha that he was dining with Bernard that night and was going to tea at the Commandant's. So there would be no work for the servants. One of them, therefore, might leave the camp if he wished and might stay in the city for the night. But both must, of course, be there on the following morning.

"You comin back at night, sir?" asked Taha.

"I don't know yet. I may. That doesn't matter. One of you must always be here. But I needn't tell you that again. We don't want to be robbed."

"No, sir. I settlin with Amar. Not wantin thieves here!"

Noel was inclined to be specially good-natured that day, to wish well to everyone. His happiness made him want others to be happy. He was inspired just then by a sort of world sense of freedom which he had never felt even for a moment in England. It made him long to stretch out his arms and draw deep breaths and look up at the sun. It was still with him when he knocked at the door of the Commandant's house.

The door was opened by Hassan, who looked curiously at Noel with his very bright and extremely intelligent eyes. Noel noticed that as he greeted the lad in a good-natured way, still ready to scatter happiness.

'Inquisitive young devil!' he said to himself as he followed the boy to the salon. 'But they're all like that at his age!'

Having shown him in, the boy gave him another very sharp look, almost as if there were some secret understanding between them, then left him after saying something in Arabic, though he could speak some French.

A moment later Madame de Pleunier came in.

As she entered the room in a dress of cream-white cloth, wearing white kid shoes and with a white band, suggesting almost a turban, bound about her glossy reddish-brown hair, he thought she looked very chic but tired and dissatisfied and as if feeling tired had also made her feel rather hard, while his radiant sensation of that day had brought with it to him a humanitarian softness. Before his visit was over, however, he thought that it was the white band round her head, just above the brow, that gave a hard look to her face, though it made her seem to him exceptionally handsome and unusually expressive. It seemed especially to heighten the intensity of light in her eyes. Indeed, she looked almost beautiful, though without any beauty of expression, that very rare quality in woman.

She greeted him in a way that struck him as almost oddly languid. Even her hand felt weary as it touched his.

"You're not ill?" he could not help saying.

"Ill? No!" she said, apparently surprised. "Why should you think so?"

"I only fancied—it seemed to me that perhaps you weren't feeling quite yourself."

She sat down on a sofa and smiled as he took a chair close to her.

"Can one ever *really* feel anything else? Aren't we all captives?"

"Oh—that! But it's just an English expression we have. A stupid one, perhaps."

"My *best* self, possibly, eh? Is that it? Well, I'll confess I have had twinges of neuralgia to-day."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, it's nothing serious. The heat is stealthily coming to this place—the heat is such an influence here—the heat that you and I must flee from before very long. Only a short time now, a quite short time!"

She fixed her eyes on him as she said the three last words, and again he noticed how remarkably expressive they were that day. They seemed full of meaning, but he could not read what exactly the meaning was.

"And then I sail for France, and you journey to Sidi Bou Saïd."

"Yes."

"It's all settled now."

"Yes."

"I heard from Sir Tom to-day. He's delighted that I have found him a *locataire*. D'you mind if we talk business for a moment?"

"No. I came partly for that, didn't I? At least from your note I gathered that——"

He broke off in uncertainty. Suddenly he had a feeling that he ought to placate her. But why? For what reason? She sat there smiling.

"That you and I must be practical together? Well, then, let us be practical. By the way, I'm certain Sir Tom's cook must be excellent. Sir Tom is a gourmet. Not a gourmand. You know the difference?"

"I think so. One has taste. The other is just greedy."

"Excellent! Well—now!"

And, showing the native ability of the true Frenchwoman in the ordering of the daily life, she entered into the whole question of Sir Tom's house and household and of the advantages and disadvantages of Sidi Bou Saïd. She told of what Sir Tom's garden produced and of what the village could be relied on to supply. Not content with that, she then got up, went to a writing-table, and came back with a paper which proved to be a list of the best shops in Tunis for provisions, for wines and liqueurs, typed out, with the addition of addresses of bookshops—only two—and stationery shops. Followed a short list of the most reliable places for carpets, for draperies, for perfumes and native furniture to be found in the souks, and finally the names of two 'tolerable' restaurants.

"There are no really first-rate ones," she said. "But you can generally get good fish in Tunis. And if you like lobsters you will find plenty of them. When I was in Sidi Bou Saïd I got all the vegetables I needed in the village and, of course, delicious melons. Do you like melons?"

"I do! I shall! How extraordinarily kind of you to think of all this for me!" said Noel, almost overwhelmed by this practical kindness and yet, strangely, feeling at the same time a little afraid of it.

"But that's my idea of friendship," she said lightly. "I was glad to help Sir Tom to a 'let,' and now I want to make sure that the 'let' will be a success for you. I should hate it if you were disappointed. And now would you like two or three letters to people I know who may be in the neighbourhood during the summer?"

"Oh, no—really!" exclaimed Noel with the thought of Aziza acute in his mind. "I want to spend just a quiet summer, bathing, and so on, and getting up my health all the time. I don't want to know people."

"Ah?"

"I don't mind solitude. Especially in a beautiful place. I shall like it. I'm accustomed to it here. It's becoming almost a habit."

"Ah?"

"So please don't bother!"

"Then I won't. But I'll just give you a word to our representative in Tunisia, Monsieur de Chantier. He'll be near you for a good part of the summer at the Résidence in La Marsa. He and the staff move out of town for the hot months. Then the British Consul General lives in a rather charming house with a big garden quite near to La Marsa. But you can make friends with him on your own account, can't you?"

Noel began to feel almost desperate. He could not understand why a woman of the world, trained in social tact as Madame de Pleunier certainly was, should press the point of there being people he could, or must, know at Sidi Bou Saïd, when he had told her definitely that he preferred a quiet, even a solitary life there. There was something almost antagonistic in her behaviour, something rigid, a pressure that he began almost to resent. But he was determined not to show any resentment and only said:

"You are much too kind to take so much trouble and thought for me. I am very grateful."

He tried to say it heartily but was not sure that he succeeded.

Just then Hassan came in with tea. He said something to Madame de Pleunier in Arabic, and she answered in Arabic. Then a short conversation took place between them, conducted on her part with a sort of gracious intimacy which made a strong impression on Noel. When the boy went away Noel said:

"How fluently you speak Arabic. I didn't know that——"

"But I've been out in this country off and on for years," she interrupted him. "And I have a natural gift for languages. That boy has been in our service since he was a small child and looks upon me almost as a sort of mother."

"How old is he now?"

"Hassan! Ask him if you like. He would probably say something absurd."

"He looks very intelligent," said Noel, feeling, though he did not understand why, uncomfortable.

"Intelligent is hardly the word. He is as sharp as a well-tempered rapier. Now let us have tea."

A moment later the Commandant came in, and the conversation became less personal and more general. But just before Noel got up to leave Madame de Pleunier spoke again of Sidi Bou Saïd and Noel's project of spending the summer there. The Commandant showed a kindly surface interest in this and spoke warmly of the charm of the place, calling it "*un des plus charmants villages dans l'Afrique du Nord, si non le plus charmant.*" Then he dismissed

the subject with his usual slightly exhausted indifference, the 'played-out' air which, nevertheless, did not entirely conceal the fact that he had an acute intellect and probably a will of iron. Just as Noel, already standing up to leave, was about to take Madame de Pleunier's hand as she sat on her divan, the Commandant said :

"When do you leave Touggourt, monsieur ?"

"In April, *mon Commandant*. I have Sir Tom Challoner's house after May the first."

"Ah ! And my wife will be off to Paris."

As he said this the Commandant looked at his wife, and Noel thought he detected an expression of satire in his glance. Madame de Pleunier returned it calmly.

"Yes," she said with an air of supreme indifference.

Noel left the house, let out by the rapier-like Hassan, feeling puzzled and less happy than when he had entered it. There was something he couldn't understand in the relation between the Commandant and his wife. And he felt as if it had something to do with himself. But how could it ? No ; that was impossible.

When he left the Commandant's house Noel had some time on his hands before he went to Bernard to dine. He was due there at seven-thirty. He looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past six. Of course he wanted to go to the courtyard and visit Aziza, but he had resolved never to go there in daylight and was determined to stick to his resolve, though he was sorely tempted to break through it. The Avenue de Biskra drew him so powerfully, however, that instinctively he walked in that direction till he reached the turning into the sandy road that he now knew so well. There he stood still for a moment.

The evening light was declining, and the distance beyond the slightly rising ground of the almost deserted avenue was beginning to take on the spectral appearance that marks desert regions in the short time that elapses between the fading of day and the abrupt descent of the night. Somewhere children were playing and faint cries from them reached Noel's ears across the sand. Children of the sands, of the desert, destined to grow up into desert men ! How strange to live out one's life in the Great Sahara and to be buried at last in a native cemetery, where a rough stone marks each separate grave of a child of Allah, and the sand grains drift over all, stirred by the light feathery wind that seems to come from the edge of the world.

Standing there, Noel thought of this and wondered about his life. How much of it was destined to be spent in the desert spaces, or how little ? His health was improving rapidly. Would the improvement last and increase ? This seemed to him now probable, indeed almost certain. Then a day would come when he was perfectly sound, when his lungs were entirely healed, and there was no reason for him to spend any more of his time in North Africa.

He imagined a visit to Doctor Rutherford Craven and the doctor, brutally frank as usual, telling him he was quite well and could go back to his work and his normal life. He had shrunk under the blow of the first verdict. Wouldn't he shrink even more pitifully under the blow of the second ? The tragedy of being ill—the tragedy of getting well ! Could he ever settle down again happily or even contentedly, a lesser condition, to



the small life of England with its hedges and walls, its white roads and minute commons? He thought of the Upper Green common and compared it in his mind with the spaces of the Sahara.

'What is going to happen to me?' The great question that millions of men have asked themselves and that millions will ask. 'What is going to happen to me in the course of my life?'

*"Bonsoir, monsieur! Comment ça va?"*

Startled, for he had been so self-absorbed that he had not heard steps in the sand, Noel turned round and was confronted by the bearded face and rather corpulent figure of the *aumônier* of Touggourt, Father Anastase.

"Oh—*bonsoir!*" he stammered, pulled abruptly back from the far and mysterious future to the commonplace of the day.

In his sonorous French, turning up the tails of his sentences, Father Anastase, an eager talker, even a bit of a gossip, entered into conversation. It seemed that he was on his way home and lived in a little house to the left of the avenue. If Noel had no engagement would he not come in there for a talk and drink a glass of Staouëline, a liqueur manufactured by the Trappist monks of Staouëli, which had been for years in bottle. Was he remaining in the city?

Noel explained that he had an engagement at half-past seven to dine with Bernard, the painter, and, unable to find any excuse for evasion, accepted the Father's suggestion. He had to get through at least another hour before going to Bernard's, so perhaps he ought to welcome this chance as luck.

A few minutes' walk in the sand brought them to the small white bungalow occupied by the priest, which lay off the avenue and not very far from the dancing house. There he dwelt with, for household, an Arab servant called Ali, who had one brilliantly observant eye and one eye that looked like a very small oyster. The little house was whitewashed inside and very plainly furnished, but its cleanliness rather surprised Noel, hitherto inclined to judge of the priest in that respect by his not entirely spotless person. It faced a narrow alley and stood right in the sand. As they entered the house a turkey moved away from the doorstep to give them place and strutted off, making its bottled ejaculation. A small half-naked child, evidently its negligent guardian, darted out from a hidden corner with a bamboo cane in its hand and followed it, shouting.

"That is my life here!" said Father Anastase, throwing up his hands with a sigh.

And shaking his large head, from which he removed his sun helmet, he led the way into his house.

Over the liqueur glasses in the barely furnished parlour he opened out to Noel, who encouraged him to do nearly all the talking and who showed himself a good listener.

He began by lamenting over his exile in Touggourt, without, of course, giving Noel the least hint of the reason for it, but soon came to subjects of greater interest, though Noel, from delicacy, would not have chosen them as topics of talk with a stranger.

Like all gossips, he was intensely engrossed in consideration of the lives and doings of those around him and was full of lively curiosity about possibilities which he evidently wished could be proved to be certainties. He was probably not a bad fellow, but, like most of his kind, he wished to believe the worst, probably because the worst is so much more dramatic and exciting

than the best. And African life had apparently been rather too much for the youthful longing after what Americans call 'uplift,' which had perhaps been his when he entered the priesthood. It was obvious to Noel that his mind now ran rather on sexual than on sacerdotal subjects and that the activities of the body appealed to him possibly even more than the yearnings of the soul.

Finding that Noel was to dine with Bernard that night and that he had just been to tea with Madame de Pleunier, he was naturally led to talk about them, and he did so with rather surprising unreserve, occasionally sipping the Staouëline in his glass with relish.

He asked Noel whether the Commandant had come in to tea and, on finding that he had, said he was glad to hear it. Naturally enough Noel asked him why. He replied with some remarks which could not rightly have been called discreet.

The De Pleuniers, he stated, were not a united couple in the true sense of the term. This was well known. (He did not say by whom.) The Commandant was an excellent soldier and, of course, a thorough gentleman. He was admired and appreciated militarily by his officers. But he had his faults. And they were faults which a proud woman like Madame de Pleunier could not easily forgive. It seemed that she had pretended to overlook them for the sake of her husband's career and their social position. She was probably ambitious for him because she was his wife and came from a great family. But as for any affection!

Father Anastase threw up his hands.

It was, of course, natural and quite *en règle* for a soldier whose career lay in Africa and whose wife could not always be with him to have a mistress. No one in France could be surprised at that, least of all a Frenchwoman of the world. No! The trouble had been—here Father Anastase sought his nose with a forefinger and gave it some taps—that the General had an eye for native beauty, a fancy for African types. Noel would understand that a woman like Madame de Pleunier would feel herself humiliated by such a preference as that. It was in consequence of the General's un-European tastes in women that Madame de Pleunier had such a dislike of all African women and especially of the Ouled Naïls. Perhaps Monsieur—he had unfortunately forgotten Monsieur's name——

"Herriot."

"—Monsieur 'Erriot had noticed her dislike?"

For a moment he paused and was ready to listen. Noel murmured:-

"*Peut-être.*"

The priest went on.

Of course long ago Madame de Pleunier had ceased to bother about what her husband did, however much it embittered her mind when she thought of it, and had turned to other things.

Here Father Anastase looked intensely significant, and his small dark eyes held a glitter.

But that was only natural. A true woman could not exist without some love in her life. Mere admiration, however welcome, was not enough. A woman needed more, much more. Should one blame her?

Another pause, and Noel said:

"*Peut-être pas.*"

But whether Madame de Pleunier had found all that she sought and was satisfied—ah! that was another thing! If *not*, she would surely go on

seeking till old age lessened her appetite for happiness or took it away altogether.

At this point in the talk Noel, although he could not help being very much interested in it, moved by a feeling that he was listening to what he ought not to hear, said abruptly :

*"Monsieur Bernard me dit qu'il va partir d'ici."*

This remark switched the priest off on to another line of conversation. But again his love for gossip got the better of him.

That strange Bernard affair had been very unfortunate. And of course a woman, or rather a girl, had been mixed up in it.

Father Anastase gave vent to a little cough at this point, one of those little coughs which are caused less by a physical than by a mental condition, by caution, perhaps, rather than by catarrh.

Ah, well ! One must not be too ready to blame anyone for incaution. But it seemed strange that a man with such a long knowledge of North African life as Monsieur Bernard had should have forgotten that, considering that the two ruling passions of all Arabs—he would make no exception—were women and money, one should tread warily when it was a question of one or the other, or possibly even of both. Did not Monsieur 'Erriot agree with that ?

Noel said hesitatingly that as he was new to North Africa his opinion could not be worth much. He did not say that because of this he would not give it. But he did not give it. Nevertheless, Father Anastase was undaunted and went on to say that Monsieur Bernard had nearly paid for his incaution with his life.

Noel refrained from any comment upon this statement, but he did not attempt again to change the subject of the conversation. He felt less delicate about hearing gossip concerned with a man than gossip concerned with a woman. Besides, Bernard had spoken to him about what had happened. Therefore, he decided to let Father Anastase rip, and after another very slight pause the exuberant Father went on :

*"And all on account of a piece of painting, they say."*

He laid a heavy emphasis on the last two words, spoken evidently with supreme incredulity. At the same time he drew down his heavy eyebrows.

But, he then added, there was painting and painting. There was landscape painting and figure painting. There was more than that. There was the painting of the figure draped, and there was the painting of the figure undraped. Monsieur 'Erriot was aware of the difference ?

At this point Noel felt obliged to break in with :

*"Naturellement !"*

And there was also, to judge by what one had heard about painters in Paris and elsewhere, painting employed less as an art than as an *excuse*. Did Monsieur 'Erriot understand his meaning ?

Beginning now to feel suddenly a painful revival of his former jealousy of Bernard, Noel said untruthfully—he couldn't help it—that no, he didn't. His jealousy forced him to press on into possible pain. That is the way of jealousy, and he took it.

Monsieur Bernard was no doubt a very fine painter, the priest continued, apparently growing in ardour as this strange conversation progressed. He had a considerable reputation in France, and probably it was deserved. Those with knowledge of the art—Father Anastase pretended to none—could decide. But what Father Anastase did know, and what Madame de Pleunier and the Commandant and Captain Sabatier knew, and what

everyone who had lived long in North Africa knew very well, was that Monsieur Bernard had the same tastes as Monsieur the Commandant, precisely the same. He admired and sought Oriental beauty rather than the feminine beauty to be found in such plenty in France, not merely for painting but for other reasons. And he had only avoided a scandal that would have done harm to the reputation of France in face of the native population by denying that what had, in fact, happened had taken place and feigning illness, whereas he had been attacked in the night by an indignant native on account of what he had done. The affair would have been taken up, of course, by the police and the authorities had not Monsieur Bernard pretended, and gone on pretending, that he was only suffering from malaria, or some such trifling malady. But probably the Commandant was only too glad to let the whole matter die down. Everything out here depended on the prestige of France, with which, by the way, the prestige of the Roumi, whether French or not French, was linked. It was a case of the European, the white race, *en face* the indigène, the black or dark race. One had to think of that out here. One must never forget it. Madame de Pleunier had a very strong feeling about that. And she was right to have it, especially in the position she held. Did not Monsieur 'Erriot agree with him as to that?

By this time Noel, unversed in the intricacies and subtleties of human desire though he still was, in spite of the fact that Africa was opening his eyes and teaching him lessons of life, felt that he was in contact with a morbid case of suppressed sexuality. Father Anastase, who was obviously growing more and more excited as he went on talking, was surely condemning and protesting against conduct that he would gladly have imitated had it been possible. Envy leaked out of him. There was violence in his little eyes. Noel felt sorry for him. For by this time he was quite certain that the priest knew something—how much he could not tell—of his own situation and was including him in the condemnation, induced by envy, that he was dealing out to others, among them to Bernard and the Commandant. And another thing. Noel knew that he understood the priest's state of mind so painfully well because in North Africa he himself had suffered as the priest evidently was suffering now. This link between them was extraordinarily unpleasant to Noel. There seemed to be degradation in it, a lowering of individualism, that which he had thought of as personal into something horribly general and, because of that, vulgar; sentiment, verging on passion, perhaps, reduced to an animal appetite.

"You may be quite right," he said coldly, trying to look indifferent. "*Je n'ai pas pensé à tout ça.*"

And he got up to go.

The priest seemed taken aback and astonished. He had evidently much more to say. There was heat in his eyes and the too-observant, almost guilty look that suggests secret knowledge retained.

"*Vous vous en allez déjà ?*"

He got up and stood by the table, by accident knocking over his now-empty glass.

"I'm afraid I must. It is getting late."

Noel thanked him for his hospitality and went out. As he walked away down the alley of sand he felt as if he were leaving behind him an enemy.

Poor man!

But hadn't Noel himself been in much the same case not long ago?

Noel's afternoon had lessened the expansive sensation that had led him to enter the camp in the morning, singing and longing to stretch out his arms and to stare at the sun. He was haunted by a creeping sense of uneasiness when he left the priest's house as night was falling over the murmuring city, was beset by an ugly consciousness of the underthings that make a man's life in connection with other human beings so often uncertain and full of anxiety. The priest's remarks about the married life of the Pleuniers remained in his mind and disturbed it. He was a terrible gossip, Father Anastase, but Noel believed that what he had said about the Pleuniers' relation to each other was true. It explained much that Noel had noticed and been puzzled by in Madame de Pleunier. It backed up, too, Bernard's remarks about her on the day when Noel had visited him by the mosque in the desert. There was at moments something almost venomous in Madame de Pleunier which overcame the restraint of her social reticence and could not help showing itself if only for a brief instant. She was a woman who had probably suffered acutely, if not in her love—Noel had no idea whether she had ever loved the Commandant or not—certainly in her pride. And this suffering, Noel felt, had brought to the birth in her something pitiless. Madame de Pleunier was a woman who needed a great deal of understanding. When only thinking of her Noel felt like a neophyte. When actually with her he sometimes felt almost afraid of her. She could be cruel. That was certain. But it seemed that she could also be very kind.

All the trouble she had taken about his visit to Sidi Bou Said and about those shops and the souks in Tunis. That list she had made and ordered to be typed out for him, or had possibly typed out herself! And her concern about the cook and the gardener, about the restaurants and what he could get to eat! The lobsters! He remembered the lobsters. He had really been touched by them, though he had also felt a slight inclination to laugh when they had been mentioned. And how kind she had been about the people he might get to know—and didn't want to know, and was determined that he would never know.

He had been irritated by that and had felt rebellious. Yet how kind it had been.

Like most people, she must be a mixture. He knew that she rather attracted him. Perhaps as the unknown attracts many people. Yet she made him uneasy too.

She had been very charming with that rapier-like page boy of hers. Something of the mother in her, perhaps, which had never been satisfied.

It was still too early to go to Bernard, and Noel strolled up the Avenue de Biskra past the dancing house, and on till he was just beyond houses and facing the desolate expanse of the desert.

Night was coming on rapidly now. He was looking due north, he believed, in the direction of Biskra. What a long time it seemed since he had been in Biskra, and yet it was only a handful of weeks. He felt as if he must always have known the Pleuniers, Sabatier, Bernard, the Maréchale, and Aziza. And yet a very short time ago for him they had not existed. Aziza was intensely vivid in his mind. Why did she mean so much to him? That was a mystery.

Behind him the music struck up in the dancing house. It was getting dark. He might surely venture to go to Aziza for a moment. He turned and went as far as the entrance to the women's quarters, but he did not go in, only paused there and listened to the violent music that he was

beginning to know so well. It was fierce, often like a shriek, and was barbaric and almost hideous. But he was learning to like it, to like its monotony, the everlasting repetition of it, the recklessness, the fact that it never ended on a full close but always in the air. Something insatiable about it as the passions of many men are insatiable. It never satisfied you, that music. It never came to rest. There was no repose in it. It incited you to febrile activity. But of what kind? There was no answer in it to that. He wondered why he was beginning to like it so much, why he never got tired of it.

A man wrapped in a burnous and hooded brushed by him quickly and disappeared into the shadow towards the music. He turned away from the dancing house. He would visit Aziza on the morrow.

When he reached the house which Bernard had hired and which he was now going to give up he felt rather guilty. He had surely neglected Bernard, who had been his first friend in Touggourt and who had, in his perhaps rather offhand and extremely unsentimental way, shown him some real friendship. He might have seen more of him than he had. But he didn't suppose Bernard cared. He had always struck Noel as an exceedingly independent and even exceptionally masculine man, who perhaps might have a soft side for women but who could surely never want to cling to, or even greatly to rely on, a man.

Feeling that about Bernard, the episode of the Bedouin had slightly surprised Noel. Somehow he would not have expected Bernard to be turned from any purpose of his even by violence. Yet fear of the Bedouin had apparently conquered not only his interest in a girl whose beauty had caught his attention, but something more and perhaps greater than that, his desire to finish a piece of work, a painting that he had been intent on. This Bedouin had driven him from both: Aziza, the girl, and his picture. It was a double victory and gained by the thrust of a knife.

Bernard, too, it seemed, was an enigma.

In England Noel had accepted people comfortably enough at their face value, had not bothered about their intricacies if they had any, being, he supposed, then far from intricate himself. Now he found shadows and mysteries in everyone almost, including himself. His psychological ignorance distressed him and brought him a feeling of inferiority. Those he knew now in the desert, the Pleuniers, Sabatier, Bernard, had surely greater penetration, more intuitive understanding of those whom they met, than he had. He thought of the priest, Father Anastase, and believed, with a sense of greater self-confidence, that at any rate he had understood that day what was the matter with him. But that understanding had come to Noel because of his self-knowledge. He and Father Anastase, alas, were akin, or had been akin. But now he had emerged into freedom.

He knocked on Bernard's door and was admitted by the smiling youth he had seen each time he had visited Bernard, who seemed delighted to see him and greeted him with a "*Bonsoir, moosoo.*"

"*Bonsoir, mon ami,*" returned Noel cordially. "*Comment va Monsieur Bernard ?*"

"*Bon, moosoo, Moosoo Bernard très bon !*"

At this moment Bernard came into the arcade and with a light step walked towards his guest.

He had caught the last words, for he said as he shook hands :

"Who is *bon* ?"

"You," said Noel. "But it was your health, not your character, that was in question."

"That young rascal might give a different account of my character, damn him. Come! We'll go at once in to dinner. I've decided to leave here to-morrow."

"So soon as that?"

"Yes. There's no reason why I should stay here any longer now. And I've rather a desire to get back to my home at Bou Saada. I'm quite well again. That wound of mine is perfectly healed, of course. I'm a healthy subject. My life out here has made me splendidly tough. I hope it will have the same effect upon you."

"I feel stronger every day," said Noel as they entered the dining-room. "That doctor in London knew what he was talking about. I used to wonder whether he was crazy and whether I was crazy to take his advice. I don't wonder now."

"If one is reasonable and knows how to live in this country and how it's impossible to live safely, there's no place like it. One can't do without it. If I had to give it up and live always in Europe I should wither away."

They had sat down at the dinner table and were eating lentil soup flavoured with onions.

"What do you mean by live *safely*?" Noel asked.

"Knowing not only what you mustn't do, but what you *must* do. Perhaps you are learning the latter lesson. By the way, what will you do this summer? Is it quite decided?"

"Yes. I am renting Sir Thomas Challoner's house at Sidi Bou Saïd and shall go there at the end of April. I feel I can't go back to England yet. Next summer year no doubt I shall. If I'm not absolutely cured then I shall never be cured. But I haven't much doubt about that."

"And then you'll take up your English life again?"

After an instant of silence Noel said slowly:

"Yes, I suppose so."

Another slight silence. Then he added in a low voice:

"One never knows."

"Fortunately," said Bernard, "I am not one of those who long to explore the future. The interest we take in life is caused by our not knowing."

Noel thought for a moment. Then he said:

"I dare say there's a lot in what you say. But sometimes I should like to know what is coming."

"Especially now, perhaps?" said Bernard.

Noel nodded.

"Are you still governed by the adventurous spirit you confessed to me that day when I was painting by the mosque?"

"Yes."

"I believe that the danger I spoke of then still exists. We can talk freely. The boy doesn't understand a word of English."

"Then if we may talk freely perhaps you won't mind my being rather frank with you."

"I never mind frankness unless it's offensive or, rather, *meant* to be offensive. What is it?"

"I believe I'm rather stupid about people. About their characters. I seem to have found that out since I've been here. I don't think I realized

it in England. Now I think I'm becoming perhaps a little sharper than I was. I hope so. But still I'm often puzzled."

"And you are puzzled about me?"

"Yes. May I say why?"

"Of course you may."

"When I met you I got the impression that you were a tremendously independent sort of man, that you were thoroughly hardened—or perhaps I'd better put it thoroughly broken in—to life out here, that you were entirely indifferent about opinion, especially native opinion, and that you would carry anything through that you undertook against any odds."

"I must say that's a very good opinion to have of any man. Have you changed it?"

"Well, things seem rather different from what I should have expected."

"That's slightly vague. Make it clearer, won't you? I shan't mind."

"I don't say I shouldn't have done what you did. I expect I probably should, in spite of what I told you that day about being encouraged, instead of put off, by what had happened to you. I seemed to have changed suddenly. I was surprised at myself—*then*. But I thought *you* would have behaved in a different way. It's difficult to put. I don't want to seem rude."

"You are not capable of being rude. Speak out. In what way did you expect me to behave?"

"In spite of what happened to you, in spite of that abominable attack made upon you, I should have expected you, when you recovered sufficiently, to brave it out, go on with what you were doing, stick to your work on that picture."

"On the nude Aziza?"

"Yes. And defy that fellow, that Bedouin."

"Perhaps I shall be able to satisfy you to a certain extent after dinner. That is, about my work. But there were two or three things I felt bound to consider. Let us leave aside one of the questions you mention for the present."

"Which one, please?"

"The question of my work. I can understand why that surprised you. Evidently, in spite of what *you* termed your stupidity about people, you grasped a salient fact about me: that with me work comes absolutely first, before everything else. I'm not sure how you arrived at that conclusion."

"I don't know, either, I just seemed to feel it."

"Intuition. It guided you rightly. But we'll leave that till later. Now for the rest. Next to my work, second only to it, comes my love of women."

"Oh!" said Noel uncomfortably.

"That surprises you?"

"No. Why—why should it?"

"Many, perhaps most, of the world's hardest workers in the arts have been great lovers of women. No need to run through a list of them. It would include some of the greatest names: Raphael, Hugo, Goethe, Balzac, Byron, Wagner, poor Maupassant, Gabriele d'Annunzio. Great workers and great lovers of women. After my work and my love of women comes a very common virtue, if virtue it is, love of country. Although I live so much out here and less in France I have a very deep love of France. And if ever it came to a question between a woman and France, which meant most to me in the last resort, it would be France. In this affair of the dancer Aziza, the Bedouin, and myself, putting my work out of the account, I was brought



up against two facts which decided me to do what surprised you. One fact was that the girl, who attracted me greatly, hadn't, and never would have, the faintest feeling of any kind for me. That really wasn't unnatural, considering that she is sixteen, that I'm middle-aged and a Roumi, and that she is an Ouled Nail, making, as it were, her *début* in the Ouled Nail way of life. The other fact was that if, after what happened, the Bedouin's attack on me, I had persisted in continuing the association that was the reason for the attack, there would almost certainly have been a public scandal which might easily besmirch the French name out here. (I'm pretty well known.) That wouldn't have been fair, let us say, to the Commandant." (Bernard smiled with faint irony as he said that.) "I preferred to avoid it."

"I see. I begin to understand," said Noel.

Bernard's remarks about Aziza's complete indifference to him, which Noel believed, had diminished the jealousy his visit to Father Anastase had brought again into being. He felt that Bernard was a truth-telling man and relied on his word. Nor could he doubt his courage. He had not abandoned his connection with Aziza from mere poltroonery, had not been deterred by a cowardly dread of the Bedouin. Noel was glad of that. He felt real friendship for Bernard and wanted to believe the best of him.

"Yes, I fully understand," he said warmly.

"No, you don't. Not yet. Wait a little. And now let us talk about your project for the summer. Of course I know Sidi Bou Said. I have painted there."

"Have you? In winter, I suppose."

"In winter and summer. Twice I have spent whole summers in Africa."

"Like Madame de Pleunier. She once spent a summer in Sidi Bou Said."

"Yes, in the Arab palace belonging to her friends, Count and Countess de Varennes. I did some work there that same summer."

"Then do you know Sir Thomas Challoner's house well? Do tell me all about it and Sidi Bou Said," said Noel eagerly.

Bernard complied with his request, and the talk for some time ran on Sidi Bou Said, which Bernard described as a model African village, astonishingly clean and yet delightfully picturesque, and with a real touch of romance and a glorious view. Towards the end of dinner Noel referred again to Madame de Pleunier's visit there. Madame de Pleunier was very often in his mind, so often that he realized the strength of the impression she had made upon him. It was not exactly pleasant; it was not entirely unpleasant. It seemed mingled of attraction and something at times like repulsion. But it was certainly strong and abiding.

"Did she stay there long?" he asked.

"The whole summer."

"Were her friends there—to whom the villa, or palace, belonged?"

"No; they weren't."

"Was she all alone there?" said Noel, surprised.

"The servants were there, and she had her French maid, Lucille."

"But what did she do there the whole summer?"

"I hardly know," said Bernard rather drily. "I was so busy painting. She bathed. She's an excellent swimmer. The riding isn't very good there, but she rode now and then. And I believe that when she has time she's a great reader."

He paused, then added, still drily:

"Madame de Pleunier is a decidedly interesting woman, *when one gets to know her.*"

Then he changed the conversation. Noel felt something had been evaded by him.

When dinner was over and they had sipped their coffee and smoked on the divan in the adjoining room, Bernard said :

"In my note asking you to come I believe I mentioned that perhaps I should have something to show you to-night."

"Yes, you did."

"And just now, when you said you fully understood my conduct about the little matter of the Bedouin, I told you that you didn't and said, 'Wait a little.' Perhaps that surprised you."

"Well, I wondered what you meant and what you meant in your note to me."

"Come with me and you'll understand."

He got up, and Noel followed him. He led the way to the upper story of the house.

"I have had the room lit up with a lot of candles," he explained. "We must do the best we can with them. They were arranged with care, and the boy has just put a match to them."

He opened a door, showing a rather large and bare room. It had a north light, and Noel at once saw that it was used by Bernard as an *atelier* and realized what was coming with mingled keen curiosity and again a painful creeping of unconquerable jealousy. The room was evenly lit up by the many candles stuck here and there in empty bottles. They gave a soft and pervading radiancy. Some of them had been placed on packing cases stood up on their ends, others in the embrasures of the small barred windows, others again on two bare tables. The room was obviously a mere painter's workroom. There had been no attempt at furnishing it or giving it any aspect of comfort. Three easels showed what it was used for. Their backs were turned to the door, which Bernard shut as they came in.

"Now perhaps you will understand," said Bernard. "Just stay here, will you?"

"Yes."

Bernard crossed the room and turned two of the easels round till they faced Noel. On these two easels there were sketches, or studies rather, of a nude girl stretched out sideways on a divan : one with her head pillowed on an arm, the other with her head leaning on the hand of an arm raised from the elbow, which was supported by a cushion. One of these sketches was in charcoal ; the other was much more finished and was in oils but still rather in the rough. Both were of Aziza and resembled her closely. Noel gazed at them while Bernard stood by them, holding one of the candles near to each in turn.

Noel said nothing. Nor did Bernard speak. The silence lasted for several minutes. Then Bernard turned the two easels round again with their backs towards the door and said :

"Now to show you the explanation !"

"The explanation ?" said Noel.

"Yes, of the conduct, or of part of it, which surprised you."

He went to the third easel, lifted it very carefully, and turned it to face Noel. This time a much longer silence prevailed between the two men. It was broken at last by Noel, who said in a rather uneven voice :

"I understand now. About the explanation, I mean. You had finished your work before the Bedouin attacked you. And so you had no reason to persist in doing what maddened him."

"No, not finished it. But I had got far enough to be able to finish it, as I wished and intended, after that knife thrust—*without the model*. If it hadn't been for that I think my love for France and wish to avoid a bad scandal might have been overcome by the passion for work, which comes first with me."

Noel looked at him with unusual fixity, as if, for the first time, trying to read his character.

"Then it *was* only that?" he said. "The passion for work?"

The sight of the finished, even highly finished picture, seemed to have suddenly brought to him an understanding he had not had till then, the understanding that Aziza did really possess a quality of beauty and mystery calculated to arouse desire, or even more than desire, not only in himself but in many other men. This picture of Bernard's seemed strangely to reveal to Noel what the living model had not entirely revealed. It was as if the painter had discovered the secret of the girl's extraordinary attraction and had told Noel what it was in paint.

'Now I understand,' Noel said to himself, 'now I understand why I'm so mad about her.'

And he felt justified to himself. He was not such a fool after all, not so crazy as most people would be sure to think if they knew of his strange passion and the intention connected with it. There was something ineffable in this girl. She was not like the other Ouled Nail women, dancers and prostitutes. There was something which set her apart from them. He could not say what it was. He could only feel it, and Bernard had felt it, divined it, and now had revealed it. Noel remembered Sabatier's words about Aziza and Paris. They had been words of truth, and Sabatier had felt about Aziza as he, Noel, had felt and as Bernard had felt and no doubt still felt. Noel recalled his talk with Bernard on the day when he had found him painting by the mosque tower, of the something a painter can add to the subject of his work, and how by this addition he can increase its meaning for him who, in any case, would be fascinated and moved by it. That had, indeed, been a true saying, and Noel felt the truth of it now more than he had felt it then.

He did not say anything to Bernard in praise of the picture. He remained absorbed in front of it. He forgot Bernard for the moment, presently forgot even himself, until Bernard broke the long silence and stillness by saying:

"Do you know Manet's pictures at all?"

Noel started, almost like a man roused from sleep.

"I beg your pardon! What was it you said?"

"I wondered whether you were well acquainted with Manet's work."

"No. I'm afraid I'm not. I know very little about painting and painters. Of course I've seen some of the pictures in London, the Turners, and so on, and the great Italian pictures. And I've been to the Louvre. But I'm an ignoramus about painting."

He forced a smile.

"I'm one of those people who only *know what they like*. Why did you ask that question?"

"There's something of Manet in that."

He pointed at the canvas on the easel.

"Is there? It's very wonderful. That's all I know. But there's something I still don't understand."

"What is it?"

"How could you give her up! If you did!"

Bernard smiled.

"My dear fellow, I thought I told you I never had anything to do with her except as a model."

There was something so absolutely convincing in his voice as he said this that Noel was obliged to believe him. And Noel's jealousy almost, though not quite, died away.

"I can't understand that!" he said with a slight sigh. "But I *can* understand the Bedouin."

Bernard turned the easel round again with its face to the wall.

"So can I. But can you understand *her*?"

"No; not yet."

"The question is this—is there anything to understand?"

"After having painted that picture, I don't know how you can say that," said Noel with sudden heat.

"Let us go down. I'll just blow out the candles."

"Oh—let me help you."

"Light your pipe," said Bernard, when they were once more in the room downstairs opening on the arcade. "I'll light mine. You mustn't go yet. This is our last evening together here. But perhaps I'll look in on you some day in Sidi Bou Said if you stay there for a good while."

"Aren't you going to France this summer like Madame de Pleunier?"

"Yes, I mean to go, though perhaps not like her. But I shan't stay for six months. So you may see me possibly. I can't tell yet."

"I hope I do," said Noel, wondering why Bernard had said 'though not like her.'

And he meant it.

Though Bernard, in his painter's pride and reserve, had not exposed it in speech, he was strongly moved by the intense impression his painting of Aziza had obviously made upon Noel. From the first he had taken a decided interest in Noel and even a liking to him. Now he felt warmly friendly. He had, of course, detected Noel's feeling of jealousy of him because of Aziza, but he understood and forgave it, the more easily because he had never fallen in love with her in spite of his strong painter's admiration of her, which might easily have become something greater if he had not always felt her total indifference to him, shown with the frank unself-consciousness of a child.

Bernard again lit his pipe, and they talked about Tunis, Tunisia, and Sidi Bou Said. Bernard told Noel that the owners of the Arab palace looking over the gates of Africa were scarcely ever there except in the late autumn, winter, and early spring. They had a château in France and a house in Paris.

"They won't disturb you," he said rather significantly. "And I believe there are only natives, some of them wealthy, in Sidi Bou Said. And of course *they* won't trouble you. If peace is to be found on this earth you should have some weeks of it in Sidi Bou Said."

"Some months, I hope," said Noel. "I mean to be there for six months, or only a little less. It depends on when I leave here. I have Sir Tom's house from the first of May."

"Let us say for some months then," said Bernard negligently but with his eyes fixed on Noel. "You are looking forward to it?"

"More than I have ever looked forward to anything till now."

Bernard waited for a moment and then said:

"Be careful during the remainder of your time here. It's not very long. But be careful."

"But why?" said Noel. "What is there? What——"

"That fellow who attacked me has been in the city. He has even visited the courtyard of the women."

Noel felt a wave of intense jealousy and anger surge through him.

"When was he there?" he exclaimed.

"Quite recently. I don't know the exact night. But quite recently."

Suddenly Noel remembered the strange impression of heat that had come to him one night from the hooded figure in the burnous, which had thrust past him in the dark as he was entering the courtyard, and an instant conviction came to him that this strange impression had come from the Bedouin.

"I believe I met him," he said.

"Met him? When? How?"

Noel told Bernard.

"It may have been the Bedouin," said Bernard.

"It was! I'm convinced of it!" said Noel excitedly.

Roughly he knocked out his pipe.

"What's the matter?" said Bernard.

"I'm very sorry, but I must leave you."

He got up from the divan.

"Please forgive me if I seem rude. I'm very grateful to you."

"What for?"

"For everything. Your friendship, your hospitality, and for that wonderful picture I've just seen. I hope to see you again, to see more of you some time. But now I must be off. I've got something to do and I must do it at once. Some day perhaps I'll explain."

"Well, go if you must," said Bernard without showing any vexation or even any surprise. "But this isn't the end of our friendship, I hope?"

"No, no!"

Noel gripped his hand.

"Of course we must meet again. You really go to-morrow?"

"Yes. I start early."

"Then perhaps at Sidi Bou Said!"

The last words Bernard said as he led Noel out into the night were:

"Remember my warning!"

Noel left Bernard's house in a state of painful excitement. He had intended to go from there to the dancing house, but what Bernard had just told him caused him to change his mind, and instead of going there he walked rapidly to the house in which Sabatier had his apartment. When he got there he knocked, with a violence he was unconscious of, on the outer door and waited for Larbi to come. He did not come, and Noel knocked again like one burning with impatience to be let in. This time the door was answered, but not by Larbi. To Noel's astonishment it was opened by Madame de Pleunier's page boy, Hassan, who greeted him with a sly smile and two or three words in Arabic.

"*Le Capitaine, où est-il ?*" said Noel loudly, entirely forgetting all the Arabic phrases he knew now, confused as he was by the lad's unexpected appearance. "*Le Capitaine Sabatier ? Où ? Où ?*"

"*Mais qu'est-ce que c'est ?*" said the voice of Sabatier, coming from one of the rooms, the door of which was open to the passage.

He came out with an enquiring expression in the eyes below his raised eyebrows, holding a letter, or note, in his hand.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Noel, almost stammering. "I wanted very much to see you. And this boy—but he's Madame de Pleunier's page!"

"Yes, Hassan. She sent him to me with a message. I was just writing a reply. And as Larbi's out I told him to answer the door."

"Oh, I do beg your pardon! Am I disturbing you?"

"No. I've written the note. Here it is."

He gave it to Hassan, said a few words in Arabic to him, and the boy went away. As he went out he turned his round head, covered thickly with closely curling hair, on which his tarboosh was jauntily perched, slightly on one side and looked at Noel with searching enquiry.

"I don't think I like that boy," said Noel as the door shut behind Hassan.

"Why not?"

"He always looks so sharp and inquisitive."

"He is both. Does it matter?"

"No. But—it's so irritating, but though I really do know a little Arabic now, whenever I want it suddenly I can't think of it. I felt such a fool with that boy just now."

"But he knows some French," said Sabatier and led Noel into the faintly lit room, thickly carpeted, in which they had smoked and had their long talk on the night when they had dined together. "He knows some French," Sabatier repeated.

"Does he? He never seems to. I've just come from Bernard. He leaves to-morrow."

"I know."

They sat down on the divan.

"Won't you smoke?"

"No, thanks! Sabatier, I'm almost ashamed. It seems as if I were forever trying to get something out of you. Help of some kind, I mean. But it's all this ignorance of the language. I'm so handicapped by it. All tied up. I can't act for myself."

"Don't worry about that. I am very glad to help you. What is it now?"

"It's still about Aziza and the Maréchale."

"But isn't it all arranged now? They've got the money."

"That's just it. That's what I'm afraid of."

"But why?"

"I heard from Bernard to-night that the fellow who knifed him, the Bedouin, has come back. It's not only that he's been seen wandering about the outskirts of Touggourt. I heard that before. But he's been actually in the city. And not only that! He's visited the Ouled Nails. He's been in the women's courtyard. Did you know it?"

"No."

"And I'm sure, I'm positive, that I met him there."

"Met him! But how did you recognize him for Bernard's assailant?"

"I didn't. I'll tell you. It was like this."

Noel related his strange experience, as of heat coming out to him in the darkness from a hooded man who left as he entered the courtyard.

"Of course that proves nothing. But I know—I know it was he."

Sabatier said nothing, and Noel exclaimed:

"Of course you think me ridiculous!"

"No. It's quite possible you are right. I'm inclined to believe it was he. Life is full of mysterious messages, many of which are not understood. If they were things might go better than they do."

"How glad I am you feel as I do! So often out here I feel very lonely. But somehow not with you."

"That's good. And what is it you think I can do?"

"After what I've done, after what we've arranged, about the summer and Aziza's coming to Tunis, I'm not going to stand being tricked and made an absolute fool of," said Noel, trying for self-control but showing his fierce excitement by the expression in his eyes, by an almost hoarse sound in his voice, and by the nervous working of his hands which he couldn't keep still. "I want you, if you will—oh, do forgive me for asking you!—to go to the Maréchale and to tell her we—I—know about the Bedouin and that he has been to the courtyard."

"Yes? And then?"

"I'm resolved, I'm absolutely resolved, not to let a horrible old woman like the Maréchale get the better of me, play with me, swindle me, trick me. I have paid all that money over. Aziza's got it—or *she's* got it. I don't believe for a moment that Aziza has anything to do with all this. She's a child almost and she doesn't understand all this underhand business. And I don't want her to. It's the Maréchale! She's to understand that if she allows that Bedouin fellow to come near Aziza I'll get that money back. I'll get it from her. And the whole thing is off."

"How will you get it from her?"

"I'll find a way. You'll help me. We'll find a way. I don't care who knows. I don't care if there is a scandal. I don't care for anything, but I won't let the Maréchale and Aziza have that money and go on letting the Bedouin——"

He broke off and clenched his hands.

"I'll—yes, I'll give it all up if that fellow's allowed to come near Aziza again. And I'll have back the money. Not that I care for it *as money*. No! But that old beast shan't triumph over me. Either she's to be straight with me or she gives up the money. I'll get it somehow, if I have to go to the police or the Bureau Arabe about it."

Sabatier looked at Noel for a moment with an expression that suggested a tinge of half-ironic melancholy that, however, was not unkind.

"You think I would never do that?" said Noel hotly.

"No. I think possibly you might. The question is how one is to deal with the Maréchale. She has the money, and no condition was made about this Bedouin fellow not seeing Aziza again. Not that it would have been worth while to make one. You wish me to threaten her?"

"Yes!" said Noel, reddening, but in a determined voice. "I want you to tell her flatly that it's either one thing or the other. After what has happened either Aziza is for me, and only for me, or I shall have back the money somehow. I'll see to that. If this Bedouin had not come back I might have let things drift on. It's only for a short time. And I didn't know how—— Oh, the whole situation is vile enough! Don't I know that?"

But I kept saying to myself, 'It's almost time to go! Aziza's time here's almost over!' And I tried to bear things somehow. But this I won't bear, I can't stand. Will you do what I can't do myself? You speak Arabic fluently. Will you have it out with the Maréchale? Make her understand that I mean it absolutely."

"You don't wish me to speak about the matter to Aziza?"

"If you think it's worth while. But I leave that to you. *I'm* certain the whole beastly part is entirely the doing of the Maréchale. She's a sink of iniquity. I'll never believe she would have a child like Aziza. It's not possible. We know, of course, what Aziza is in one way. That's not her fault. When a girl's brought up in a *tribu* like that of the Ouled Nails she simply hasn't the ghost of a chance to be what we English call *decent*. One mustn't expect that, and I don't. But that doesn't mean that she's tricky and false and dirty in money matters and can't have any feelings that—that might *redeem* things, the other thing, that is. But I leave it to you to speak to her, if you think it's any good. One thing I'll tell you. I *know* it."

"What is that?"

"I *know* now she is capable of feeling, and I *know* now that she has some feeling for me."

Noel brought out the last words almost with triumph, looking straight into Sabatier's vivid blue eyes.

Sabatier made no comment on this and did not show by any change of expression what he thought of it, how it impressed him. He only said:

"When do you wish me to see the Maréchale?"

"To-night! Now! Oh—don't hate me! But I can't wait. How do I know what may be happening to-night?"

Sabatier shook his head.

"What d'you mean by that?"

"My dear fellow, these women are not so simple as you seem sometimes to think. For all they know, you might be coming to-night. When was it that you thought the Bedouin fellow went past you?"

"It was not very late. But I was on my way to the courtyard to see Aziza."

"Was the fellow hurrying out?"

"I think so. It seemed so."

"You know that eunuch, whom you seem to dislike so much?"

"I can't bear him."

"Well, he works for the women. Especially for the Maréchale."

"I know he does."

"Do you think he doesn't keep watch and look out for what's happening in the courtyard? Do you think he doesn't know all that's going on there, all the shifts and intrigues and secrets of the women? Do you think when a big money question is on the tapis a woman like the Maréchale takes risky chances? If you turned up to-night in the courtyard you wouldn't find anything happening there that would trouble you, unless the Maréchale thinks she knows that you are safe in your camp. Does she know? How can she, when as a matter of fact you're in the city? Is your Taha in Touggourt to-night?"

"Probably. If he isn't Amar, the cook, is."

"The same thing—with a difference that doesn't matter. The Maréchale has her eunuch and two other strings to her bow, your two servants."

He got up.



"I'll go now and do what I can. And what will you do meanwhile?"

"May I stay here till you come back?"

"Of course. Stay again for the night. Larbi will soon be back. You won't mind being quite alone here till he comes?"

"Of course I shan't. You're a true friend, Sabatier. I shan't forget this."

Instead of saying something banal in reply to this Sabatier said:

"I do what you wish. Whether it's the wise act of a true friend one doesn't know yet."

He put on his military cap, flung his burnous over his broad shoulders, and went out into the night.

When he had gone Noel immediately lit his pipe. Having done that, he banked up two cushions on the divan and lay down on it in the dim light with his face to the doorway. He would hear Larbi when Larbi came in, but he was quite glad to be alone for a little while after the painful excitement of the evening. He must pull himself together, try to be calm. Sabatier always seemed, not unfeeling, but so absolutely controlled. What must he have thought of Noel's outbreak of emotion, of his violent words?

'How I gave myself away! How I gave myself away!' Noel said to himself.

But he wasn't really sorry for having done it, wasn't really ashamed in the Englishman's way. Sabatier, thank God, was a Latin, not an Anglo-Saxon, and would be able to forgive him, had not, perhaps, even been surprised by his conduct, his exposure of raging jealousy.

Perhaps an hour had passed, and Noel still lay stretched on the divan, always smoking, when he heard the sound of a door being shut. He took his pipe out of his mouth and sat up, listening. It might be Sabatier come back with his news. Or of course it might be Larbi. There was silence for a moment; then he heard the soft noise of a shuffling step, the step of a man wearing native slippers.

"Larbi!" he called. "Larbi!"

A guttural ejaculation came from the passage; then Larbi appeared at the door—not looking surprised. (Noel remembered afterwards how very seldom he had seen a look of surprise on any face of a native.)

Quickly searching his memory, he found some words of Arabic and succeeded in conveying slowly to Larbi the fact that he had seen the Captain and was going to spend the night once more 'here.' (He tapped the divan significantly.) "Here!" Larbi smiled and spoke in reply, conveying the fact of his satisfaction. (Noel had given him a *pourboire* after his previous visit.) Then he shuffled delicately away and in a short time returned with coffee. Having set it down, he went again to the doorway, sat down cross-legged beside it as if on guard, rolled a cigarette, lit it, and began to smoke, looking imperturbable and as if he had forgotten all about Noel.

His calm, soon almost dreamy behaviour soothed Noel, who sipped the coffee and began to feel less feverish, less anxious about the outcome of Sabatier's visit to the Maréchale. These natives knew certainly the secret of repose. Really, at times there was a superiority over Europeans in their way of tackling life. From his divan Noel watched the smoke from Larbi's cigarette curling upward and evaporating in the shadows and began to say to himself, 'Does it all matter so much? Does it matter?'

But when, perhaps half an hour later, he again heard the sound of a door, when Larbi, with one movement, rose instantly to his feet and there

came quick steps in the passage, his nervous excitement returned, and he started up from the divan.

It was Sabatier. He stood in the doorway, gave his cap to Larbi, flung off his burnous with an energetic hand, and stepped into the room.

"Well, how has it gone?" exclaimed Noel abruptly.

"I'll tell you."

He sat down on the divan. Noel sat down beside him.

"First let me light my pipe."

With careful deliberation he made the necessary preparations. It seemed to Noel, impatiently waiting, that his slowness was intentional and directed, like a sort of weapon, at him. Perhaps Sabatier wanted to force calmness upon him. Noel made an effort to emulate his friend's impassivity. He would not try to hurry Sabatier, who quite evidently intended to take his time.

Having lit his pipe at length, Sabatier smoked for a minute or two, as if in reposeful consideration of something, and then said:

"It is very difficult for a Roumi to understand the mental processes of these native women."

"But you have lived in this country so long!" said Noel. "And you speak the language so fluently!"

"And yet most of the time I live face to face with an enigma. We French conquerors are defeated in one thing."

"What's that?"

"The conquered keep, and will always keep, their secret from us."

"But what secret?"

"The secret of what they really are, of their true selves. I know *you* really better than I know any Arab. And as to the women! Well, they defeat us partly by being so rudimentary and yet at the same time so slippery, so ignorant and so cunning, so stupid and so sharp."

"The Maréchale has never struck me as stupid," said Noel, impelled to bring Sabatier from a general consideration of feminine Africa to the personal problem that was so terribly important to him.

"She's as keen as a blade in some ways. That's true. I wonder whether she is less stupid than I am."

He spoke meditatively. Noel could bear his reflectiveness no longer and exclaimed:

"Do please tell me what happened. Did you see Aziza?"

"Yes. Eventually. But first I tackled the Maréchale."

"How?"

"We began as usual with coffee and compliments. I then came at once to the matter of the Bedouin. She pretended not to know what I meant. She asked what Bedouin I was talking about. Many Bedouins visited the Ouled Nails from time to time. I explained that of course I knew what had happened to Bernard and why it had happened.

"Everyone knew. She pretended surprise at first and even ignorance. But I drove her out of it, and she then said that the fellow who had knifed Bernard had fled into the desert and would certainly not come back. He came from the south and had nothing to do with the Bedouin who frequented the desert near Touggourt. I listened to all this and then told her that I happened to know he had been in the women's quarters to visit Aziza within the last two or three days. She pretended surprise and said she knew nothing of it. If it were so Aziza had said nothing about it. I said

she had the eunuch to keep her informed of all that passed among the women, but that others also had their means of information as to what went on. I and others *knew* the Bedouin had been there, and we even knew on which night and at what hour of the night. This seemed to convince her that my cunning had for once got the better of hers. The Bedouin, of course, had been, and of course she knew he had been, and with her connivance. How did I know it? Yet evidently I did. She believed that, I could see, and was taken aback by my apparently secret means of getting knowledge of what went on in her domain. However, she quickly recovered herself, and, but with great, almost servile politeness, asked me what interest I had in the Bedouin and why I was talking so much about him. I felt then that the time had come to be frank and told her that, being your friend, I had concern on your behalf—you being unfortunately unable to speak much Arabic—to tell her that if the Bedouin was ever allowed by her to visit Aziza again, before the girl left Touggourt to join you in Tunis for the summer, you would at once demand to have the money you had paid over back, and that if this was refused you would lay information against her at the Bureau Arabe and make a public scandal of the whole matter.

"And now here comes in the stupidity of these native women."

"How? How? I don't see!"

"Wait! Really, what *could* you do?"

He fixed his blue eyes on Noel, and a piercing look came into them.

"Let me be brutal. You have fallen in love with an Ouled Nail girl. You want to get her for yourself during the whole summer. You offer her a large sum of money for this. Or, rather, on her behalf a large sum of money is demanded from you and you pay it over in anticipation of what is to happen. The money goes from you to this girl, or to the Maréchale supposedly on behalf of this girl. The bargain is made by words, not by writing. There is nothing legal about it. You then threaten to demand the return of the money unless a certain Bedouin lover is eliminated from the girl's life. What means have you of carrying out your threat in action?"

He stopped speaking. Noel said nothing.

"How can you force the return to you of this money if the girl, or the Maréchale for her, refuses to eliminate this evidently very persistent Bedouin?"

"I don't know," said Noel reluctantly.

"Nor do I. But now don't be too downcast. Actually the old rascal didn't seem to see it."

"She didn't?"

"And there, perhaps, came in the ignorance and stupidity of these women. She seemed furious but also alarmed, as if she genuinely believed you might be able to find a means of forcing her to give back the money. I don't see how you could!"

"But even if I couldn't, mightn't I be able to do her so much harm with the French authorities—I don't know exactly who they are, but you may—that they might force her out of her position here? I suppose they can do pretty much what they like, can't they?"

Sabatier nodded gravely.

"That might be a possible revenge, but it mightn't cause the return of your money. And the whole thing would be rather unpleasant for you, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, I know!" said Noel almost desperately. "And I don't want

revenge, and it isn't the money. What I want is to *prevent*! But you know!"

"Yes, of course. Well, I believe I put fear into the Maréchale's heart, if she has one."

"Then did she believe we could force her to give back the money?" asked Noel eagerly.

"I almost think she did. I've considered it. I may be mistaken. But it really seemed like it. But she wriggled."

"How? What did she——"

"She wriggled. She said she had nothing to do with the money. It was not hers, but Aziza's."

"I said if that was the case I would very soon settle the matter with Aziza."

"The case! But it *is* Aziza's. I gave it to her."

"It ought to be. There's the difference. And suppose she really is Aziza's mother?"

"I'll never believe that," exclaimed Noel angrily. "You don't, surely?"

"I haven't the least idea whether she is or not. But I think it's quite possible."

"O God!" exclaimed Noel, for the first time in his life taking the Deity's name almost blasphemously on his lips. "Out here *everything* seems possible!"

"Yes, doesn't it?" said Sabatier calmly. "Then I told her she'd better send for Aziza at once."

"And did she?"

"She didn't want to. But as I had got her just before to say that the money wasn't hers but Aziza's, it was difficult to refuse. Besides, I said I wouldn't go till Aziza came. And that settled it."

"Was Aziza dancing?"

"Yes. The eunuch went to the dancing house to fetch her to us."

"That horrible eunuch! I do hate his being mixed up in my affairs!"

"*Mon ami*," said Sabatier with his gentle, half-melancholy and, it seemed, half-satirical, smile, "if you will plunge headlong into the life of the Ouled Nail *tribu* you must not expect everything to be conducted as it probably was in your English parish."

"What a crazy fool you must think me!" said Noel, reddening to the roots of his thick mass of hair.

"No, I don't! What is life without adventure? I have done crazy things and still hope to do a few more before I slip away into Allah's Paradise. Besides, haven't we just agreed that everything is possible out here in the desert's belly? The eunuch shambled away to the dancing house and after a long time came back with Aziza."

"What did you and the Maréchale do all that time?"

"We both smoked in profound silence; she, keef, and I, tobacco."

"And when Aziza came?" said Noel with an intensity he didn't even try to dissemble.

"I explained the situation to her with brutal frankness. I needn't recapitulate. If I do we shall both be bored."

"How did she take it?"

"She didn't seem to understand. She laughed at first in her girlish or birdlike way."

"I know!"

"As if it was all a joke. But I impressed on her that unless she and the Maréchale did as *you* demanded steps would immediately be taken to take away the money and that you would never come near her again."

"And then?"

"Then she cried."

"Poor little thing!" exclaimed Noel.

"I have never seen anyone cry so charmingly as she did. Scarcely any noise. Just a tiny whimpering. But many real tears."

"But didn't you try to comfort her?"

"No. That would have been bad policy. I was stern and continued to insist that she would never see you again unless she never again saw the Bedouin. Then, of course, dear little thing, she lied."

"Lied?"

"Yes. She swore she had not seen him again since the attack on Bernard."

"Perhaps she hasn't! Perhaps really she has not!"

"*Mon ami!*" said Sabatier. "*Mon cher ami!*"

"He may have gone there and not have seen her. How can we tell?"

"*Mon pauvre ami!*"

Noel clenched his hands on the divan and pressed his two fists against the cushions. How he hated what he thought of as Sabatier's cynicism at that moment.

"Anyhow," he said, controlling his voice and leaving it, "do you think she was crying about the money or—or—or about me?"

"I leave you to decide about that. Anyhow, her tears were real and rolled down over the paint. That I can swear to."

"And the Maréchale? Didn't she do anything, say anything?"

"Ah, yes, she did! Her pantomime was tremendous. A Niagara of words gushed from her."

"What did she say?"

"Ask me rather what she left unsaid. The answer would take less time. Using the greater part of the ample Arabic vocabulary, she protested the virgin innocence of Aziza in regard to the Bedouin. She tried at enormous length to make me feel I was a brute."

"Well——"

"Yes?"

"Well, but didn't you try——"

"*Mon ami*—no!"

Noel couldn't prevent a hostile expression from distorting his face. He waited for a moment and then said:

"And what happened? How did it end?"

"It ended in the Maréchale's swearing—by the beard of her father, I think it was, or something analogous—that Aziza should never see the Bedouin again, that he should never come near her till the time came for her to leave Touggourt."

"To come to Tunis! Thank you, Sabatier. And Aziza?"

"She was always gently but persistently weeping."

"I'll make it up to her! I'll make it up to her! She's not the guilty one."

"And so I left them."

"And you believe it's all right now?"

"I believe they were really afraid about the money."

"Not Aziza ! You mean the Maréchale."

"*Pourquoi pas ?*" said Sabatier, dropping into French as he did now and then either from forgetfulness or because French just then went with his mood.

"Money has a meaning for these women that we can scarcely understand. It gives them a standing with the *tribu*. It releases them from a life they may well be tired of."

"I should think so !" said Noel vehemently.

"And it enables them to settle down into respectability with the man they fancy."

"We needn't think about that in the case of a girl so young as Aziza," said Noel with a decisiveness that only partially concealed his exquisite aversion from the thought just suggested. "Besides, she isn't awakened yet. That may seem to you strange, but it is so. I know that by—by the last time I was with her. She's only just beginning to—to feel. Only just beginning."

Again Sabatier smiled, this time without speaking.

"Not much time now till you go !" he said.

"And she too !"

"During that time perhaps you had better convey the impression to the courtyard that you will be visiting it every evening when it gets dark. You haven't a eunuch. But you have a couple of—shall we say faithful servants ? It may be all right now. But, as you said, nothing is impossible here. You must tell Larbi when you want your bed made up. Now I have two or three letters to write before I sleep."

Remembering what Sabatier had said about his having two supposedly faithful servants, and determined now to visit Aziza every night till he left Touggourt, Noel overcame his natural *pudeur* and informed Taha that he and Amar had leave to go to the city and stay there on alternate nights, as he would probably be away from the camp from now on every night after dinner, which must be served henceforth just before sundown.

Looking exceedingly intelligent, Taha thanked Mister Nowill for this unexpected favour. He would, of course, inform Amar, who was like his brother. He did not ask the why of these changes. Of course he had no reason to. He knew very well what it was.

The first dinner served to Noel in camp after his explanation with Taha was placed on the table just before sundown, and when he sat down to it he was informed that Taha was to be his companion in the walk to the city.

"We shall start as soon as darkness begins to fall."

"Yes, sir."

Directly dinner was over Taha was told to get ready to set out.

Feeling sure that so far Madame de Pleunier knew nothing about his frequent visits to Aziza, Noel was particularly anxious to get away from Touggourt without doing anything that might rouse her suspicions. Something in her—he couldn't have said exactly what it was—inspired him with a faint feeling of distrust. Yet he rather liked her ; he was conscious that she had, or might have, some influence over him ; she even attracted him, or some part of him. But he feared her hatred of the Ouled Nail women. She must never know about him and Aziza. He didn't want to be disliked and despised by her.

So he waited till the sudden darkness that came after sunset had fallen and then immediately started for the city with Taha.

Nothing of any consequence happened till they came to the city. They walked mostly in silence. Noel was plunged in thought, wondering how he was going to be received after the scene of the preceding night. Taha strolled along beside him, occasionally humming an Arab song to himself. It chanced to be a very dark night with few visible stars. There must have been vaporous clouds in the sky. And there was no moon. To gain the courtyard and the dancing house they had to cross the great market-place that lay in the centre of the city. At that hour it was abandoned by the crowd that thronged it during the day. Two or three watchmen made their rounds, with guns slung over their shoulders. Now and then a night wanderer crossed the vast space, hurrying on some errand. Here and there from the low arcades that surrounded the square came furtive sounds of thin music and the flicker of lights. The minaret of the great mosque towered up in the blackness.

As Noel, always with Taha, drew nearer to the courtyard his mind became more and more concentrated on Aziza, and when Taha, breaking off the love song he had been humming, suddenly uttered a greeting in Arabic, Noel was startled. He had not noticed anyone near them, hadn't heard the sound of a footstep.

"What's that?" he said.

He looked quickly round but saw no one.

"Him Hassan, the Commandant's boy. Him seen me."

"Hassan!" said Noel, frowning. "Did he see me too?"

"Of course him seen you, Mister Nowill. Hassan very sharp boy. Sharpest boy in all Touggourt."

"What was he doing?"

"How I knowin what him doin? Doin somethin for the Commandant's lady, p'r'aps. She likin him very much."

Noel said nothing more, but his brows were still drawn together in a frown. He wished Hassan had not met them. He remembered the lad's bright searching eyes turned upon him several times in a scrutinizing gaze, full, apparently, of intense curiosity. But more than that. Full, Noel thought now in remembrance of that gaze, of suspicion and even of a sort of intimate understanding.

Would the boy tell Madame de Pleunier of the meeting? He might. He probably would. But if he did she might suppose that Noel had been on his way to Sabatier or to Bernard.

Suddenly Noel remembered that Bernard had left the city. He had forgotten that departure because his mind had been so taken up with other things. But there was Sabatier. He recalled the note he had seen in Sabatier's hand, written in answer to a communication from Madame de Pleunier. He decided to go to Sabatier's quarters and find out if he was at home.

He told Taha this, and they made their way to the house in which Sabatier had his rooms. Noel knocked; Larbi opened the door, and Noel asked if Sabatier were in. Larbi answered that he was out. He had gone to dine with the Commandant and Madame de Pleunier.

When Taha had left him at the entrance to the courtyard Noel went at once to Aziza's chamber. Apparently she was not there, for her door was

shut and locked. But possibly that might mean . . . Noel lifted his hand, doubled it into a fist, and knocked violently on the wood. There was no reply, and an Ouled Nail whose room was next door indicated by gestures accompanied by a flood of Arabic that Aziza was in the dancing house. Noel thanked her and stepped down into the courtyard.

For a moment he stayed there, uncertain what to do. He did not wish to see Aziza dancing between rows of staring desert men. He did not wish to linger among the men who came in and out of the courtyard. After considerable hesitation he decided that, in spite of his hatred for her, he would brave the Maréchale and wait in her room for Aziza.

He found her sitting once more with the eunuch and, as usual, smoking her pipe of keef.

He came there completely uncertain how he would be received. Unable to judge of the probable reactions of these women, he never knew what they would be likely to do. Of one thing only he was practically certain in connection with them. They were never likely to react to anything as a European would. The Maréchale had been threatened by one who had come to her as his emissary. Her protestations had been disbelieved, swept aside. She had been given the lie and had eventually been forced to come to heel, to give in to his, Noel's, demand conveyed to her by Sabatier. This was how Noel thought of the matter between them as he entered her chamber with a firm step, a look of fixed determination glued on his face, ready for anything that might befall. She must hate him. He had no doubt of that. But as he looked at her dusty magnificence he felt that—no!—he did not hate her. As a human being she was too far away from him, was a creature, as it were, in the distance. He only felt an intense repugnance towards her, as towards something unclean.

When he came in the eunuch looked round and, seeing him, got up from his stool with an intimate, welcoming smile. And to Noel's surprise this smile was immediately echoed—it almost seemed reproduced—on the face of the Maréchale. Her mouth was a large one, and now she stretched it almost from one heavy earring to the other, at the same time lifting her arms rather as she had done on the memorable occasion when she had leaned forward on her divan throne to pat and press his cheeks. This demonstration seemed to Noel even worse than the exhibition of hatred that he had thought was just possible. That would at least have shown a frankness of soul. This must be sheer hypocrisy. But perhaps it would be easier to deal with than open enmity. And almost instantly he knew that he ought to have expected it. For was he not the money giver? And was not this majestic hypocrite in fear that somehow, by some means beyond her understanding, if she did not behave the money might be filched from her? Evidently fear had really entered her heart. This wide-stretched smile, these ardent painted hands, betrayed it.

With awkward reserve conquered, Noel gave one of his hands into hers, which were dry as the Sahara. They closed on his with a grip of iron and drew him down possessively to the eunuch's stool. Then he was released for the coffee clap. The eunuch slunk away with a backward glance, and the enemies were left for a moment alone. But this time silence did not descend, and the keef pipe was laid aside. The Maréchale's hypocrisy could not brook silence. And though she must have known by now that Noel understood very little Arabic and none at all unless it was spoken carefully and distinctly, as when Aziza now and then spoke it under his direction,



she broke into a voluble monologue, accompanied by descriptive gestures, sometimes feline and coaxing, sometimes servile and humbly submissive.

As 'crawling gestures' Noel thought of them afterwards when he considered that interview and in memory re-saw the Maréchale. She was doing her horrible best to propitiate him, to force herself into his good graces. Although he understood very few of her words he understood much of her pantomime and was sickened by it. But he put up with it and even, in a way, was able almost to welcome it, as evidence that she had given in to Sabatier's threat and that her yielding was complete, even abject. He surely must be safe now. His summer must be safe. This old harpy was too fond of money to take the slightest risk where money was concerned. Certainly she had taken one risk, but, having been found out, she would not venture on a second one. This conviction buoyed Noel up, and when coffee was brought his heart was so lightened by it that he was able to act in his turn. His smiles almost equalled the Maréchale's in their beaming extension, and he even threw in now and then a sentence in Arabic calculated, he hoped, to keep her going so that his silence might not seem too obtrusive and to be withholding assent to her voluble protestations of friendship and faithfulness. Of course he could not match her in an exhibition of hypocrisy, match the Arabian bird with the English twitterer. But his gaiety of sudden belief in the future carried him through in a wonderful way, and when presently Aziza appeared from the dancing house, wearing the green shawl, the two had all the appearance of being in lively and confidential talk, for all the world like a couple of cronies.

And now Aziza in her turn showed vivacity. When she saw Noel a look of sweet happiness transfigured her face. It seemed absolutely genuine. She *was* delighted to see him. He sprang up from the stool to greet her. His heart warmed to her. For the first time in their intercourse he felt, not passion, but simple affection—something so much truer, so much purer than passion—coming out of her into him. She was fond of him and in her childishness showed it with unself-conscious frankness. He longed to take her at once in his arms and to kiss her. But the grinning eunuch was showing his long yellow teeth just behind her, close to the doorway, and in front of her the stretched—perhaps this time maternal?—smile was again in evidence from earring to earring.

The Maréchale now spoke again, but only after imperiously, by a gesture, ordering the eunuch to get out. She addressed her attention to Aziza and was evidently explaining the gist of the interview she had just had with Noel and impressing upon Aziza the necessity and duty of absolute faithfulness and submission to the Roumi who had deigned to look upon her with favour. Her manner, her gestures, the sound of her words, made Noel feel like a Sultan. Sabatier had indeed played his cards well for his friend. The impression he had made had evidently been enormous. Noel felt more grateful to him than ever, and when the Maréchale finally dismissed the lovers, after receiving Aziza's jewels and giving her the key of her chamber, he was probably happier than he had ever been before in his life. He knew, of course, that all the Maréchale cared for and thought about was his money. But he was now convinced that Aziza had not yet been entirely spoiled and corrupted by her way of life. Perhaps her childishness, not yet abolished, had so far saved her from that. She still had a capacity for genuine feeling. She still had at moments the charm that surely can only come from genuine simplicity. Her present display of happiness, so obvious that it could not

be doubted, must be caused by her eagerness for the long summer with Noel, her feeling that she could be very happy alone with him, taken away from all her comrades, from all her people, taken away from the domination of the dusty old Maréchale. A gust of joy shook him as he realized all this, realized specially how completely she must be trusting to his affection for her, leaning, as it were, on the knowledge of her safety with him away from all others. It was touching—such girlish trust. No fear, no suspicion, no doubting. He would be worthy of it. And now to go to her chamber! Softly he took the big door key out of her hand. Then he shook hands with the Maréchale, and he and Aziza went out to the courtyard.

Noel's growing conviction of Aziza's dawning fondness for him was strengthened that night. Any last lingering doubt of it was abolished from his mind. Her happiness was so obvious, was so freely shown, was so unmistakably genuine, that any suspicion of acting only suggested itself to Noel to be immediately dismissed as unfounded. There is good acting and bad acting. The Maréchale was an actress and at times rather a good one. But even at a first meeting with her, when she sat on her divan in solemn silence like an idol, almost devoid of expression and apparently heedless of observation, anyone of real discernment could have detected a *poseuse*. She was the mother of the maids. She was emphatically 'it.' And when she emerged from her silence and gave vent to moods of intimacy, energy, authority, or violence there was a suspicion of acting in them all. She had always an eye to effect. She was on the lookout to note the reaction of those she was with. But Noel had often noticed, when alone with Aziza, how completely indifferent she could be in her curious staring silences when she sat or lay beside him, lost, evidently, in dreams which he could not fathom, or in a vague emptiness of mind which took no account of his presence.

There had been an occasion when Noel had believed that for once, and for a short time, the Maréchale had been so entirely absorbed by the matter in hand that she, with Aziza, had forgotten that anyone was in her room but themselves. But that had been, he believed, a rare, an almost unique, occasion. Self-interest then had blotted out personalities. Yet Aziza had often seemed devoid of self-interest when Noel had given her money and she had not looked to see how much it was. She had accepted without examining. He believed her to be still a child of nature. Much of her fascination for him lay in that. And now she seemed a child of nature in her happiness, her gaiety, her playfulness, when the stout palmwood door was shut upon them and the big key had been turned in the lock.

Her playfulness reminded him of the unexpected turns and twists, the supple attitudes, the springs, relaxations, and pretended abandon of a kitten, which frisks, often sideways, stays mortally still of a sudden, but in its stillness is ready for an instant and startling movement directly the mood of movement takes hold of it. Aziza's moods seemed many that night, but not one of them was tragic or even sad. All of them seemed governed by an all-pervading feeling of happiness, which sometimes rose, he believed, into a childish sensation of triumph, such as a young thing often shows when it has unexpectedly received a new and wonderful toy. Making that comparison in his mind, Noel put himself in the place of the toy. Was that sheer vanity? He asked himself that with the secret anxiety of a not usually vain man. Or was it a reasonable comprehension

of a delightful truth forcing itself upon him? Hadn't Aziza had a fright when the scene of Sabatier and the Maréchale and his threat had come to her knowledge, had been exposed to her, as it must have been, by the Maréchale? Her tears had been a proof of her fear that she might lose what she had been promised and had been looking forward to. There had been the question of the money—yes. But there had also been the question of Tunis and the long summer with him. And now she was thoroughly reassured. She had been told—it must be so—that the mysterious Bedouin who had caused all the mischief was to be driven out of her life by the Roumi's determination to have her all to himself, and, because of this, she rejoiced. Convinced of this, Noel's acute jealousy of the man whose face he had never looked on died out of him, and a marvellous peace of mind came to him. Aziza evidently had never cared for that man. She must have suffered him in the way of business. Horrible enough! But she was an Ouled Nail, one of the extraordinary *tribu* which, as a *tribu*, a man such as Noel was would never be able to understand. But couldn't he come to an understanding of one of its members? He began to believe he could. He believed that night that he had. For even an Ouled Nail must have certain feelings, contain certain possibilities common to all women. And Aziza was surely proving that to him now by the radiant happiness that evidently possessed her in all her little doings.

She chattered to him in Arabic, which he pretended to understand and tried ardently to guess at. She listened, smiling, while he said to her all the words he knew, assembling them together with a frowning intensity which she watched with encouraging eyes. Several times he said to her the word 'Tunis,' pointing in the direction where, for all he knew, Tunis might be, then pointing to her and himself. This seemed to delight her. She moved her pretty head up and down as if in assent, echoed the word 'Tunis,' pointed to Noel and back to herself and away to the distance, and then burst out into a peal of light laughter, as if the idea of being with him in Tunis was a marvellous joke. He was obliged to laugh, too, and pretend that the idea of that situation presented itself to him as great fun. She was such a child that he must play the boy with her to-night and draw laughter out of her happiness. Don't people often laugh at nothing when they are very happy?

She opened the great painted coffer in which the Ouled Nail girls keep some of their finery and showed him one by one all her dresses and shawls and veils and handkerchiefs and her slippers. She was specially proud of the slippers, measured them against Noel's brown brogues, and indicated with delight how tiny her feet were in comparison with his big trampplers. (Though his feet were really nothing out of the common in respect of size.) He took hold of her little feet and gave each one a kiss. For a moment she looked grave in approval. The action, it seemed, gave her such pleasure that it brought a sudden expression of profundity into her face.

But her mood quickly changed and, springing up from the narrow divan on which they were sitting, she poised herself for a dance, with the obvious intention of giving him pleasure, as Carmen in Bizet's opera danced to give pleasure to Don José.

Now it happened that even Noel's infatuation for an Ouled Nail had not led him to any love of the characteristic dances for which, in Arab circles, they are famous. He thought the dances lascivious, provocative certainly, and in that sense exciting, but totally without any real charm, and though

strange, not really interesting. The jerking forward and backward and from side to side of the head, the sudden thrust of the chin, he thought brutal and sinister. The only part of their performance that for him had some fascination was the waving and fluttering movement of the arms and the fingers in the dance of the hands. And even that had a certain monotony and soon became dull in his eyes. He therefore had no desire to see Aziza dance even for him. It would make him think of the rows of staring desert men who night after night sat gloating over her with their dark eyes. He wanted to take Aziza away from all that, wanted to make her forget it. And when she said something eagerly and stood poised before him and suddenly assumed the curious expression, withdrawn, unobservant, and almost stern, which she always assumed when she danced and which he had been struck by on the night when he had first seen her, his instinct was to stop her, to tell her somehow that he didn't want that of her. But something held him back. She might be offended if he did that. This was her *métier*. She had been brought up to it and no doubt considered it important, as an actress considers her performance in a striking rôle which has been admired by crowds. So he only forced a smile, sat back on the divan, half shut his eyes, and let her begin.

Her room was very small, and the greater part of it was filled by the bed. There was little space for her movements. But she didn't seem to mind that though she was accustomed to advancing, in the dance, down the long alleys of the dancing house between the white lines of watchers, to the sound of the shrieking hautboy and the monotonous bang of the tom-toms. Now there was no music except the faint noise from the dancing house that came to them across the courtyard and through the thick palmwood door. And because of the lack of fierce music the dance seemed, to Noel, to have lost every bit of charm. Even the waving arms and the fluttering fingers had no grace, and the movements of the head and chin looked merely brutal. But he continued to watch it all with his eyes half shut and the slight smile fixed on his face. Aziza did not seem to be aware of him now, as she never seemed to be aware of the crowd while she danced unless she presented her forehead for a coin, but presently she came directly in front of him and began performing the *danse du ventre* in an exaggerated form for his benefit.

Noel watched it for a moment, noticed that her eyes were not watching him but held their withdrawn, almost unseeing look, and shut his eyes.

That dance, performed by her for him only, brought to him a feeling of his own degradation. He felt like a man going down. Where was he going? How would this end? What would be the result of this episode? By what obscure influence had he been entangled in this extraordinary connection to which he had now wholly given himself? There was, he thought, still keeping his eyes tightly shut, but conscious always of the jerking and shuddering and writhing body in front of him, only one thing to be done now, and he would, he must do it. When Aziza had been taken away from this chamber, this courtyard, this dancing house, she must never be allowed to go back to them. He had promised the Maréchale that he would bring her back or let her come back. But he would break his promise. The wild idea of reform, of drastic reform, was born in his mind. Instead of going down any further than he had already fallen, he would teach this girl to go up. She was still only a child. Not more than sixteen. At that age surely nothing in a nature is irreparable. People talked of certain things, tastes, inclinations, vices, being housed in the blood. He wouldn't believe that.

In a child surely nothing is fixed beyond the possibility of being eradicated. He would make it his business to release Aziza from the horrible life she was living, unconscious that it was horrible. He would take her away and, having done that, he would keep her away. She should never come back to Touggourt. And in time . . .

There came a loud knock on the palmwood door. It broke in upon Aziza's performance for her lover as the bugle call from the barracks of Seville broke in upon Carmen's dance with the castanets for Don José! Noel opened his eyes, sprang up from the divan, and remained still in a tense attitude, his eyes fixed upon Aziza, who stood gazing at him in a rigid pose, with her arms which had been upheld hanging close to her sides.

'The Bedouin!'

Noel did not utter the words, but they sprang up in his mind. He knew it was the Bedouin, as he had known that the man by night in the doorway that gave on to the courtyard and the dancing house, and from whose body fierce heat had seemed to come out, was he.

There was a moment of silence, only impinged upon by the distant sound of the African hautboy and the tom-tom which came to them from the dancing house. Then the knock came once more on the door, more fierce, more violent than before. And this time it was repeated again and again, as if whoever was outside was trying to batter the door down and force his way into the room.

Aziza turned round and stared at the door. Her soft lips had fallen apart. There was a peculiar expression on her face. It seemed to Noel half terrified and half strangely expectant. It was not a moment for analysis, and Noel did not analyse, but after the startling event of this night was over, and part of the past he remembered Aziza's face as it was at that moment, and he thought there had been expectation in it as well as alarm.

But what kind of expectation? That puzzled him—for a time.

The tornado of knocks was followed by shrill cries from female voices, growing louder and suggesting that Ouled Nail women, disturbed in their lit doorways, or perhaps in their love traffic behind the shut doors of their chambers, were flocking towards the sound of the knocks. Then men's voices became audible, and finally there was a hubbub of humanity on the other side of the door. But still the fierce knocking continued, suggesting the fury of someone who cared nothing for what was outside of his purpose, which was to force his way immediately into Aziza's room.

Aziza still stayed motionless, absorbed in attention. But Noel broke from his rigidity and moved quickly till he stood close to the door.

He now had his back turned to Aziza. While the hubbub outside increased, women's and men's voices mingling together, he felt a sudden grip on his shoulder. It was so astonishingly strong that he could scarcely believe it came from one of Aziza's small hands. But it must be so, and he turned to face her. As he did this her hand dropped away from him. While he looked at her with eyes that asked her a question she shook her head, put a hand to her lips, drew down her eyebrows, and wrinkled her smooth, girlish forehead in a warning frown. Her whole look and manner told him plainly:

'Don't do anything!'

He nodded to reassure her and turned again to listen at the door.

And now a voice broke in upon the uproar—the knocking had not stopped for a moment—and by its strident and commanding force detached

itself from the other voices and seemed to reign over them. Noel knew it as the voice of the Maréchale. It went on speaking, or rather shouting, for a moment before its influence penetrated through the ears to the minds of the demonstrators. Then gradually the sounds from their lips broke up, diminished, were dispersed, till some were heard separately. And finally a sort of semi-silence fell, broken only by widespread murmurs and by the still-continued knocking on the door. Then even that murmuring died down, and the voice of the Maréchale ceased, and only the knocking was audible. There was a curious effect of drama in the dry angry sound of the beating on wood, backed by the intense silence of what Noel and Aziza both knew to be a waiting crowd just outside of the door.

Again Noel felt Aziza's hand against his shoulder. But it was not a grip this time ; it was only a touch.

He turned his head without turning his body round. She was holding up her door key and looking fixedly at him. As their eyes met she pointed to the door key with her left hand, shook her head, and then thrust the key under the folds of the flimsy dress she was wearing, designed to show almost indecently all the movements of her slim body while she danced.

Noel understood. Nothing was to induce them to open the door.

He was about to give her a look and gesture of assent when something happened which induced him to turn swiftly and go quite close to the door. So close that his body touched it.

This interruption was caused by the unmistakable voice of the Maréchale, which now sounded clearly just outside of the door, and by something else even more startling to him. The noise of the knocking, which had seemed to him like the hammering of Destiny on his life and Aziza's, ceased.

Then he heard at once the Maréchale's voice more distinctly. It continued speaking for a moment. And then came a new sound, the sound of a man's harsh, guttural voice coming angrily, as it seemed, up from the depths of the throat, as Arab voices do.

The voice of the Bedouin ! He heard it at last, the voice of the man whom he now felt that he hated with every nerve in his body and every drop of his blood. Would he ever see the face of that man who was trying to interfere with his life ? Would he perhaps see it that night ?

Violent excitement woke in him. He pressed his body up against the door and listened intently. The colloquy between the Maréchale and the man went on for a moment. He could not understand a word of it. But by the sound of the Maréchale's voice he guessed, or gathered, that she was admonishing the man, and by the sound of his voice he guessed that the man was angrily resisting or refuting her admonitions. Then there was a sudden diversion. The Maréchale's voice rose abruptly into a sort of angry shriek, and by the difference in the way it came to him Noel gathered that she had probably moved a little way off and turned round. For two or three minutes the shrieking vituperation—it must be that—continued, broken only by the murmur of a number of voices. Then there was a scuffle of feet, a brief silence, and then the Maréchale's voice, softened almost to a sort of cooing whisper, sounded quite close to the door. She had certainly moved away some steps and returned and was now again addressing the man by the door confidentially. Noel guessed that she had angrily driven away the crowd that had gathered, sent them about their business. He was wishing more than ever before that he understood colloquial Arabic

quickly spoken, when there was a movement behind him and the touch of a body against his.

Aziza had joined him in his vigil against the door.

Her face was now tense with attention, and by the look in her eyes Noel gathered with certainty that she was no longer thinking of or attending to him and was probably almost unconscious of his presence beside her. She knew that he was there, must be aware of it, but had for the moment forgotten it. Her desire to hear what was being said to the man on the other side of the door blotted Noel out of her mind. He could not doubt that.

The Maréchale's voice, now slightly raised—the crowd must have dispersed—but still unusually soft and alluring, a persuading voice, continued for several minutes without the man saying one word, either in protestation or agreement. She must be telling him something, explaining something, which completely held his attention. Noel would have given much to know what it was. Aziza knew. He could tell that by the intensely interested attention of her face, which made her look severe, no longer childish, but almost old. At last the Maréchale's voice ceased, and the man's voice, still harsh and intensely masculine, but sounding less angry than before, spoke a few sentences briefly and stopped. The Maréchale then again took up the tale, but now in a much more dominating voice, which sounded to Noel as if, once more feeling freed from the necessity of persuading, she was reasserting authority and ordering what, if anything, was to be done.

Yes, she must be giving her orders. But what could they be? Aziza knew. Her so-intent face seemed to brighten mysteriously, though her brows were still drawn together in deep concentration. But there was a hint of light at the edge of the cloud.

The man spoke again at some length. The Maréchale made what seemed a brief reply. Then she said one word, the first Noel had understood. It was the Arabic for 'come!' Immediately after this Noel heard a shuffle of steps. Then silence reigned. Even the music in the dancing house had faded away.

Aziza turned from the door. She looked at Noel and repeated the Maréchale's word.

"Come!" she breathed.

Her face was radiant. She held out her girlish arms.

But Noel took her in his.

On account of his ignorance of Arabic—his knowledge being still limited—Noel was unable to ask and receive full information about the events of the night. He could only guess at them. He might have again called in Sabatier to help him out. But he decided against this. Sabatier had already done enough for him. He did not care to try his friendship too far. Besides, he gathered enough knowledge to set his mind at rest and to promote his happiness. He was positive that the man who had knocked was the Bedouin, though this was never told him. The Maréchale had intervened and evidently with triumphant success. She had got rid of the crowd. This was explicable enough because of her obvious unquestioned authority in the courtyard of the women. What was less explicable was the fact that she had also evidently got rid of the Bedouin, the furious man who had knocked on Aziza's door. How had she managed that? Noel longed to know but did not know. He only knew that Aziza was radiant during the

time following that troubled night and that nothing happened to interrupt his happiness with her. She seemed perfectly satisfied with his company and delighted, in her generally quiet Oriental way, with his attentions, though she never showed again what he thought of as her kittenish mood. It was perfectly evident that the Bedouin had meant nothing to her and that she was relieved to be rid of him.

Noel's jealousy of the fellow and uneasy anticipation of his violence entirely died away. There was no more trouble at night. He never beat again on the door. Noel's mind was at rest about him.

But he was worried about something else.

It was obvious to him that the uproar at night in the courtyard, caused by his presence in Aziza's room, must have become known through the whole of Touggourt, which was, as he had found out, a hotbed of gossip. Was it possible that Madame de Pleunier had not heard of it? The Commandant must surely have got to know of it. It was his business to know of what went on in the city, and Noel felt convinced that he had means of informing himself and used them. There was the Bureau Arabe, and no doubt he had agents. His eyes, Noel was positive, were wide open on the scene of his labours. He was a quiet-seeming man, but he didn't miss much. As to Madame de Pleunier, he might not have spoken to her about the matter. Noel had the feeling that those two, though so much together, were not in each other's confidence. But Madame de Pleunier, too, might possibly have her informants. Noel's mind recurred uneasily again and again to the rapier-sharp page boy, Hassan, who had met him and Taha at night in the deserted market-place on their way to the court of the women. He was no longer uneasy about the Bedouin. The Maréchale had quite evidently found the way to get rid of him. She was an infernally clever old thing, and Noel trusted her diabolical cleverness. But that boy Hassan!

The relation between Madame de Pleunier and Hassan, Noel felt, was not quite an ordinary one. He believed that the boy was devoted to her. That might not be the case. He had not a great deal to go upon. He just felt that it was so without having very much evidence. And she certainly had a considerable liking for Hassan. It might be more than liking. It might almost amount to a sort of motherly affection for the boy. Decidedly there was a rather unusual kind of intimacy between them, with perhaps a doglike devotion on the one side and a faintly maternal feeling on the other, the latter coming from a childless and perhaps a rather lonely woman.

Yes, Madame de Pleunier was a lonely woman. Suddenly Noel's mind dwelt on that. He had not thought of it much before; now it was borne in upon him. A lonely woman and rather bitter, a woman who had been disappointed. Under her agreeable and generally smooth social manner, the manner of a trained woman of the world, he divined secret bitterness, now and then hinted at, even manifested, secret disappointment.

Probably she had a restless nature, perhaps a nature that needed a great deal in some form or other and had not had what it wanted, or at any rate not enough of it.

Noel was not clairvoyant about women, but he felt that something in him, at any rate, began to understand something in Madame de Pleunier. And he felt uneasy.

If she got to know, perhaps through Hassan, of what had happened that night in the courtyard!



What would happen then? She would certainly be disgusted, would conceive a contempt for him, would despise him, might even cut him from the list of her friends and acquaintances. And this after all she had done for him, her hospitality, her obvious friendship for him, the trouble she had taken for him about the house in Sidi Bou Saïd, about the supplying of it from Tunis, about offering to introduce him to people who lived there and who she thought might be useful to him! His cheeks, burned by the African sun, burned again as he thought of these possibilities. And he dreaded meeting her, dreaded meeting the steady, searching, understanding gaze of her experienced reddish-brown eyes. It would be intolerable if she knew.

But a very few days after the scene of the night in the courtyard his uneasiness was set at rest by an incident. One morning Hassan arrived in the camp with a letter from her, or rather a brief note. And in it there was an enclosure: an introduction from her for him to the French Resident in Tunis, recommending him warmly to His Excellency as a good friend of hers.

Noel's mind was so immensely relieved by this that he sat down on the spot and wrote a friendly, even almost enthusiastic, letter of thanks, though he didn't at all want to know the Resident or, indeed, anyone within reach of Sidi Bou Saïd. He even ended it with the words:

*I can never be sufficiently grateful to you for all your kindness to me.*

*Believe me,*

*Your sincere friend always,*

NOEL HERRIOT.

Quickly he put the letter into an envelope, addressed it, and gave it to Hassan with a handsome *pourboire*. The lad thanked him with great politeness, gave him one of the searching looks which Noel rather disliked out of his very bright eyes, and went off to the city.

On the following day he returned again to the camp, this time with an invitation to dinner from Madame de Pleunier for that evening.

'Forgive me for giving you such a short invitation,' she wrote. 'But my husband has to be away to-night. He dines in the mess, and I shall be left alone. And once before you and I had such a pleasant evening *à deux* that I'm inclined to repeat it if you agree. Dinner at eight. My faithful Hassan will wait for an answer.'

As usual Noel had been intending to go immediately after nightfall to Aziza, but he decided at once to accept Madame de Pleunier's invitation. He must not alienate her friendship by any careless action. If he refused to dine with her that evening and went instead to Aziza, and if by any evil chance she ever found out that he had preferred an Ouled Nail to her company, she would be his enemy for life instead of, as now, his friend. Even he knew enough about women to realize that. He would manage, if possible, to visit Aziza later.

He had no jealous fear now of the Bedouin. The Maréchale had got rid of him. He would let Aziza know that he could not be with her till late. She still danced before the crowd almost every night. He had not tried to prevent that, though he never went to see her performance. Very soon she would be released. As the De Pleunier dinner was at eight, he would escape about half-past ten. Madame de Pleunier was not likely to try to detain

him, but if she did he would think up some excuse for going. That would surely not be difficult. But two hours and a half of him would probably be enough for her.

He wrote to say he would come with pleasure and made his second note almost as friendly and enthusiastic as his first. And again he gave Hassan a generous *pourboire* which was received by a "Kater kherak," followed immediately by a "*Merci, moosoo.*"

Noel patted the boy on the shoulder. He felt a sudden wish to get into his good graces, to be liked and appreciated by him. And he followed the pat by some words in Arabic. Hassan looked surprised and gave him an answer that sounded meek. But his glance contradicted his voice. He had eyes that could not look meek. A phrase that Noel had learned was 'How old are you?' To show interest in Hassan he now said it. With a very serious air Hassan announced that he was '*seize*' and held up both hands with the fingers and thumb extended, then one hand and one finger of the other.

"*Seize!*" he repeated, the second time with importance, keeping his bold bright eyes fixed upon Noel as if wishing to impress him.

Noticing this, Noel pretended to be surprised, exclaimed "*Vraiment!*" and sent him off, apparently well satisfied.

He began to feel a furtive interest in Hassan that he could hardly account for.

He wondered how much Hassan knew about him. Of course, having been a few times to the camp, though only for very short visits, he knew Taha and Amar, and he had talked with them once or twice while waiting for Noel's written replies to Madame de Pleunier. Noel wondered whether he ever met either, or both, of them in the city. Taha had spoken of him once as if he knew him quite well on the occasion of their meeting at night with him in the market-place. Hassan must surely know all about Aziza and the row at night in the women's courtyard. Again Noel felt uneasy. Wasn't it very probable that Hassan had chattered to Madame de Pleunier about that occurrence? But if he had, wouldn't there have been an immediate change in Madame de Pleunier's behaviour to him, Noel? Would she have written that friendly note enclosing the warm introduction to the Resident General of Tunisia and followed it up by that cordial invitation to dinner? He re-read both her notes and was reassured. If Hassan did know—and perhaps he didn't; why see everything *en noir*?—possibly he hadn't spoken of it to Madame de Pleunier. Although she was evidently rather fond of him, and he seemed greatly attached to her, she mightn't choose to encourage a native, even so young as Hassan, in any familiarity. He couldn't have spoken, or she would never have sent those two notes.

Amar, whose night it was to stay in the city, accompanied Noel when he set out for the Commandant's house and would probably have gone with him to the door if it had not been for an unexpected meeting that was very disagreeable to Noel. Just at the entrance to the market-place they came upon Father Anastase. Noel, who disliked and distrusted the Father, took off his hat, said, "*Bonsoir, mon Père!*" and was about to walk quickly on, but Father Anastase stopped and said:

"May I accompany you as far as the dancing house? It's almost my way home."

Noel stiffened with reserve and vexation.

"I'm sorry. I'm going to dine with Madame de Pleunier."

He dismissed Amar with a gesture.

"Ah, really! I thought it would be the dancing house," said the priest, fixing his small fanatical eyes, in which an angry light seemed burning, on Noel.

"No. Why should it be?" said Noel, defiantly.

The priest shrugged his broad shoulders and spread out his hands.

"Well—as you go there most nights!"

"I am *not* going there."

"No? That was an unpleasant scene there the other evening. I am glad it did not lead to actual bodily violence. But if I may advise you—be more careful. There have been murders on account of those women. I could tell you——"

*"Bonsoir, mon Père!"*

Noel began to move on, but the Father for a moment kept up with him. Quite evidently he was in a state of excitement.

"Excuse me. I have been so long in Africa, and you are new to it. It is a great mistake for a Roumi, as you are, to have anything to do with these Ouled Nail women. They can never——"

Noel stopped and stood still. Then he said:

*"Mon Père, I prefer not to speak of these things. You and I are almost strangers. My life is my own to do as I please with. I leave you to yours."*

He managed to govern his voice and, he hoped, to speak coolly though firmly. Then he took off his hat and walked on.

Father Anastase stood looking after him with hostile eyes, murmuring words to himself in the dark. Noel knew he was leaving behind him an enemy.

He was very much disturbed in mind by this meeting. The priest was a gossip. He was more than that. He was evidently a frustrated fanatic, corroded by envy of the pleasures the men among whom he lived enjoyed but which were denied to him on account of his profession. Noel had been reassured about Hassan, having come to the definite conclusion that if he knew anything about the affair in the courtyard he had not spoken of it to Madame de Pleunier. Now a new fear was born in him. Father Anastase surely would speak, out of his envy, his anger, his sense of frustration. Believing this, Noel arrived at the Commandant's house, wondering whether this might not be the last time he would have pleasant intercourse with Madame de Pleunier.

He was let in, not by Hassan, but by one of the tall Arabs who had waited on them when he had dined for the first time with the De Pleuniers. He found Madame de Pleunier alone in the drawing-room. The Commandant had already gone out to dine at the officers' mess.

It was a very hot evening. The heat in Touggourt seemed to be increasing with every day that went by. But that evening was specially sultry. The secret breeze, whispering over the desert, seemed to have fire in it. As Noel came up to Madame de Pleunier he thought she looked tired. She was dressed in white, an obviously very thin dress, which showed the beauty of her extremely slight and still-agile figure, the figure of a woman who had not neglected sports but who had not hardened herself by excesses of activity. She could not, Noel thought, be much more than forty; perhaps she was only just forty.

As she shook hands with him she seemed almost to beam on him. He had never before seen her look so warmly cordial and friendly. He dreaded

the change—when she knew. But he wouldn't think of that. And perhaps . . .

Anyhow, it was obvious, it was absolutely certain, that she knew nothing yet. Why stare towards a future and imagine it black?

"Our time here is nearly up, isn't it?" she said as they went to the dining-room. "Have you fixed the day of your departure?"

"As I have Sir Tom's house from the first of May, I thought of leaving here perhaps about the fifteenth of April," said Noel.

They sat down to dinner. The windows were shut against the heat of the night.

"It's nearly time to go. The heat here is becoming oppressive."

"When do you go?"

"About the same time as you, I think. I confess I am longing for Paris."

She paused, then added :

"But *you* are facing the unknown."

"Yes. But that's interesting."

"Then you are looking forward to your solitary summer, so different from mine?"

"I am looking forward."

Something kept him from beginning the sentence with 'yes.'

"Evidently you are a very independent being."

"Oh—I don't know! One has to try to be independent. And my health has improved so tremendously out here. And good health makes for a feeling of independence, I think."

"So you've been happy out here?"

Her apparently casual question suddenly made Noel question himself. Had he been happy?

"I've had some very happy moments," he answered.

"Perhaps that's as much as most of us can say, *if that*, when we think back over our lives. The scraps that fall from the master's table! But still our aim never alters."

"Our aim?" said Noel.

"Don't we all aim at happiness?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose we do."

"Don't you aim at happiness for the summer?"

An urgent 'yes' would have been the truth of Noel at that moment. But caution made him say mildly :

"Yes, I suppose so. I hope to like Sidi Bou Saïd when I get there."

"And I hope to have a good time in Paris," she said, more briskly. "If I give you my address there will you write me a line now and then and tell me how you get on?"

"Of course I will. With pleasure. You have been so kind to me."

"I live in the Avenue Henri Martin. But I'll give you the number."

And then she talked lightly of many things, avoiding all society gossip because Noel knew no one whom she knew beyond the confines of Touggourt. She told him where was the best place to bathe from in Sidi Bou Saïd and added that, if he liked to go farther afield, there was a long lonely *plage* away to the left of La Marsa, where one could bathe from the beach and lie in the sand without being observed, except perhaps by some African fishermen.

"I used sometimes to go there when I had my one summer in Sidi Bou Saïd."

"What made you miss Paris and spend a whole summer in Africa?" Noel asked.

"Just a whim!" she said.

She waited a moment, then added:

"A whim and the offer of the wonderful house of my friends, the De Varennes. When you see it you will understand. It is a divine place."

"Do tell me some more about it," Noel said, looking at her rather narrowly, for it had occurred to him that perhaps she had just told him an untruth about her reason for having spent that long summer in Africa. She had seemed to speak frankly, and the reason given was surely natural enough: the loan of a lovely house offered to her in a wonderful place. What woman might not have had a 'whim' to accept it? Yet he felt that she had had another reason for staying on in North Africa but did not choose that he should know it. But why should he know it?

She seemed quite unconscious of the doubts and suspicions that were slipping through his mind, and in answer to his request she gave him a lucid description, such as only a woman could give, full of small details, of the exquisite house overlooking the gates of Africa, and of the steep garden on the hillside descending in a series of terraces to the edge of the sea. On the terrace before the marble colonnade white peacocks sunned themselves. Far below tiny waves curled over and broke softly on the sand where the Bey of Tunis had his bathing pavilion. And beyond, between the Cap de Carthage and the dreaming hills that guarded the bitter lakes, the ships from Europe glided by on their way to Tunis la Blanche. All the time she was speaking Noel thought of Aziza and of a long African romance in which she would be his companion. He trembled on the verge of something ineffable. Could such a paradise be waiting for him? He listened with absorbed attention. Never before had he been so concentrated on Madame de Pleunier, so enchanted by the sound of her voice or by any words of hers. But all the time he was thinking of Aziza, of her strange Oriental beauty, of her secret which he could not divine. And when Madame de Pleunier stopped speaking he could not help saying:

"I wonder you never spent another summer in that wonderful place. Evidently you were enchanted by it."

Suddenly a sort of spasm twisted her face. Once before Noel had noticed with startled surprise a similar spasm. It was only momentary. Then she said:

"Yes. But"—she spoke slowly now, like one considering while she spoke—"but perhaps it is dangerous to repeat, or to try to repeat."

"A keen pleasure? But if it's connected with nature and beauty? There's something lasting to catch hold of and keep in them, isn't there?"

"Sometimes, though we try to add something to them, don't we?" she said. "And that may be dangerous."

"I'm not sure that I quite understand," said Noel, thinking of Aziza while he spoke and, because of that, feeling not wholly sincere.

"No? Let us leave it. You may never have made that attempt. And perhaps all the better for you."

"Then you will never have another summer in Sidi Bou Saïd?" Noel felt impelled to ask her.

"Who can know? But *this* summer I am going to Paris and the social world. I acknowledge I love it! It supplies me with nourishment for body and mind. To say nothing of *soul*." (That word sounded ironical on her

lips.) "A great difference between that and the blazing tranquillity of Sidi Bou Saïd!"

"You call it blazing!" said Noel, feeling disconcerted; he scarcely knew why.

"In summer the sun beats down there, as in most African places. But the nights—ah, the nights are enchanting!"

She was silent for a moment. Her face was very grave. And its gravity made her suddenly look rather older. Noel watched her and did not speak. He felt that she must be away in the summer nights of Sidi Bou Saïd. He almost felt as if he were away in them too—with Aziza. Evidently her African summer was remembered by Madame de Pleunier as a great experience. Then did this woman, this woman of the great world, who evidently had such a love of Paris, love solitude too? Something contradictory in that, wasn't there? He began to wonder about her. And not only that! He began to feel that he had always wondered about her. Certainly he did not understand her. Certainly she interested him. He had never had anything to do with a woman at all like her before. Not only was she French, and so very different from Englishwomen, but she was also a woman steeped in knowledge of the world, and he had never known such a woman till now.

Without speaking again she got up from the dinner table. He got up, of course, too, and followed her into the drawing-room, admiring the easy and light way in which she moved and always wondering about her.

They had spent rather a long time over dinner.

There was a clock in the drawing-room. When it struck the half-hour after ten Noel remembered his resolve and got up to go. Since their conversation at dinner and afterwards he felt more anxious than ever about the possibility—now, he feared, become a probability—that Madame de Pleunier would get to know of what had happened in the women's courtyard and would completely change towards him. She did not know anything yet. He was quite positive of that now. He hated to think her ignorance might be changed into knowledge. He was no longer afraid about Hassan, but he was now afraid of the priest, Father Anastase, and as he got up he wondered whether by any means he could forestall the Father without giving himself away. As he was searching his mind for some expedient Madame de Pleunier said:

"Noel don't go yet. Are you tired of me already?"

"Of course not!" said Noel, hesitating, wishing to go to Aziza but also wishing, if it were possible, to make things safer for himself with Madame de Pleunier.

"Then stay till my husband comes back. He won't be late. He told me he'd be in by eleven at the latest."

"Oh, then——"

Noel sat down again, though reluctantly. Given time, perhaps he could manage to do something for himself. But what? While for a few minutes they talked of this thing and that, of little doings in Touggourt, French policy in North Africa, and possible happenings presently farther afield in Morocco, he continued searching his mind, and presently, as the talk fell again on the subject of Touggourt and Bernard's departure for Bou Saada, he said:

"Coming here to-night, I ran across Father Anastase."

"Ah, did you?" said Madame de Pleunier, rather indifferently.

"And the other day, when I met him by chance towards sunset, he asked me into his house. Do you like him?"

As he asked the question he thought, 'I am being blatant!' But it was too late now to strive after subtlety.

"Like Father Anastase?" said Madame de Pleunier in a musing voice. "Well"—her voice changed to decision—"frankly, no! I don't. Do you?"

"I'm afraid I don't either."

"Why is that?"

"And may I ask you why you don't afterwards?"

"Yes, if you want to."

"I think he's a great gossip."

"You are right."

"And I think he's inclined to be what in French is called *mauvaise langue*."

"You are right again."

"It seems to me he might be very inventive and imagine a great many things about his neighbours that would probably be quite untrue. There's something fanatical in him, and I should think his mind is given to exaggeration. I shouldn't care to believe one-half of what he says."

"He is fanatical, poor man. Between ourselves strictly——"

"I promise."

"—he is in the wrong profession. He should never have been a priest. There was a scandal about him in Tunis. But I told you!"

"Yes."

"Here he has to behave or he would get into serious trouble. Enforced celibacy in the midst of such a place as *this* tortures him. That's what is the matter. Many men who give their lives to religion in a hurry, when they are quite young, have a very difficult time later on. You may not realize this, perhaps, but I know it is so."

She paused, as if expectant of some remark from Noel, but he said nothing and kept his eyes on the ground. In a moment she went on:

"I should never dream of believing all the nonsense about others that he thinks and says. You may be sure of that. Most of it comes from a diseased mind."

She said this with a sort of implacable decision that was unnecessary and slightly surprised Noel. Nevertheless, he was reassured, felt a sense of relief. She was surely a woman who judged for herself about others, used her own wits, formed her own conclusions. Her remark about the difficulties faced by those who gave their lives to religion when young had touched him on the raw, but it convinced him that she had not the least suspicion about him. He thought of his clerical clothes locked up in the box in his tent. How astonished she would be if she ever found out. But she wouldn't find out, for Sabatier would never reveal a thing told to him in strict confidence. Noel was certain of that.

"He's a man to be pitied," he said.

"He is. But he's not a man one can like. Sometimes I see him in a hospital—for *minds*!"

As she said this the Commandant came in dressed in uniform.

After a few minutes of conversation Noel got up to go. As he said goodbye he thought of Aziza. In a few minutes he would be with her in that totally different atmosphere, dealing, or trying to deal, with a mind and

nature amazingly unlike those of this Frenchwoman and this French officer. How startling but how entertaining were the sharp contrasts of life, jostling one another like people in a crowd.

But the night had a surprise in store for Noel, one that he couldn't welcome.

As, after leaving Madame de Pleunier in the drawing-room, he stood in the hall, putting on the burnous which he now always wore at night, even when it was hot, for he had been told to beware of the change of temperature between day and night, the Commandant, who had accompanied him, said in his dry but not unkind voice :

"You are walking to your camp, I suppose. Or have you ordered a sand cart ? I didn't see one at the door when I came in."

"Oh, I'm walking, of course !" said Noel hastily.

"Then there's a soldier waiting for you outside. One of my men."

"A soldier !" Noel exclaimed. "But why ?"

"I've detailed him to accompany you to your tent."

"But, my Commandant, that's entirely unnecessary. I assure you I am not in the least afraid of going alone. Everyone knows me now. They all know I have the good luck to be, if I may say so, a friend of yours—and of Madame de Pleunier's."

"That makes no matter. I would rather he went with you."

One of the tall Arab servants who had come noiselessly into the hall now opened the front door. Outside a French soldier was standing in the uniform of the Chasseurs d'Afrique.

"Being the head of things here, I have access to a good deal of knowledge that is kept from—shall we say, the general public ? Things have not always gone quite smoothly lately in Touggourt. The soldier will accompany you to your camp. And of course *pas de pourboire, cher monsieur*."

His voice was inflexible, though he smiled as he said the last words.

Noel had to yield. Feeling like a prisoner and with a heart that raged against destiny, he walked back to the camp, the soldier walking behind him.

After that night Noel was convinced that the Commandant knew about his connection with Aziza and what had happened in the women's courtyard on the night of the Bedouin's violence. The Commandant knew, but Madame de Pleunier did not know, and he would not talk with her about such an affair, having his reasons for discretion with his wife about women and their affairs with men who had come to the desert from Europe. There was, Noel believed, a great deal of understanding between Madame de Pleunier and her husband, too much understanding, probably, but little confidence. Barricades had risen between them or had been built up by them. The Commandant was a man who kept, and had reason to keep, as much as he could from his very intelligent wife.

'He knows about me,' Noel said to himself. 'But he'll never tell her.'

And he absolutely believed it. Nevertheless, he began to feel uncomfortably that the belly of the desert was a whispering gallery and he longed to be away from it with Aziza. In a city, such as Tunis, people would not have time or opportunity to bother about him and his doings. Father Anastase would be far away. And the Bedouin would be left behind in the spaces of the Sahara.

Noel often wondered by what magic the Maréchale had got rid of the Bedouin. There was mystery in her power over him. Her authority over the Ouled Nail women he understood. But why should a violent man,



evidently a furious lover, no doubt a sensualist, and proved to be criminal—why should he so suddenly, and apparently so completely, give in to a woman, to an old woman? (The Maréchale might not be very old in years, but Noel felt that she was old in everything else: old in experience, old in wickedness, physically old, though energetic, and mentally even hoary.) That the Bedouin had given in to her was evident. Noel's connection with Aziza was no more troubled by him.

It was curious how Noel realized this man, as if he had known him, as if still he knew him almost with intimacy, although he had never looked on his face or exchanged a word with him. He knew him by the strange heat that had come out from his body—it must have been *his* body—in the night at the doorway of the courtyard. He knew him by the furious persistence of his assault on Aziza's door, a persistence that even the gathering of a crowd and the cries of the Ouled Nails had not prevailed over. He knew him through what he had done to Bernard.

And this man had been exorcised so easily and so thoroughly. It was strange. Noel didn't know how to account for it.

He consulted his friend Sabatier about it. But Sabatier, too, was quite in the dark. Pressed by Noel, Sabatier enquired of the Maréchale. But after pretending not to understand what he was talking about she simply said that the Bedouin was a very bad man, made much trouble in Touggourt, but had now gone away in the desert, 'not coming back.'

"I begin to believe that the creature has the powers of the witch of Endor," Sabatier said.

And Noel was inclined to agree with him. But a feeling almost of gratitude to the witch came to him, and his heart softened towards her. She was on his side now. Of course he knew why. It was merely a question of money. Nevertheless, she had shown her power, mysterious to him, and it had been used to his advantage. He would always remember that with a feeling of gratitude.

The heat in Touggourt was now becoming day by day more intense and the persecution of the flies almost intolerable. The time for the departure of all those who could get away was drawing near. The Commandant was staying on for some time, and so was Sabatier, who might later see Noel in Sidi Bou Saïd on his way to France for his leave. "But say nothing of this!" was his injunction to Noel. Madame de Pleunier had made her arrangements for going to Paris and seemed to be greatly looking forward to a thoroughly social summer. When Noel saw her two or three times she seemed to him to be in unusually good spirits and full of anticipation. Evidently she was tired of life in Touggourt and longing to get away. She thought she might leave about the eighteenth of April.

The arrangements about Aziza were worrying at Noel's mind and giving him trouble. He was not bothered about her installation in Tunis. He was sure he could manage that. Even he looked forward to the fun of arranging about it with eagerness and excitement. But the getting her from Touggourt to Tunis—how was that to be arranged? This was indeed a problem. And of course he was obliged once more to have recourse to the good offices of Sabatier. His knowledge of Arabic was improving every day. He was a quick learner and very assiduous. But, nevertheless, he did not feel capable of tackling the Maréchale about Aziza's journey. She could not possibly leave Touggourt with him, travel to Tunis with him. The scandal would be too great. Madame de Pleunier, evidently still quite unconscious of

Noel's supposedly hidden life, would be forced at once into complete knowledge by that. Some secret way must be found, someone unearthed to take charge of Aziza from Touggourt to Tunis.

Noel went to Sabatier and begged his help and advice.

"When do you want the young lady to go?" Sabatier asked. "Before you leave here or later?"

"Just a little later, I think. Three or four days after me. I don't want people here to connect her departure with mine."

"You are thinking of Madame de Pleunier?"

"Well—yes, perhaps I am. You know how she feels about the Ouled Nail women. And as she's been very kind to me here and has even given me a letter to the Resident of Tunisia, I don't care to——"

"I understand," said Sabatier. "I am about the last person who needs to be informed about Madame de Pleunier. She can be a good friend. But she can also be an excellent enemy. And if you are coming back here next winter—but are you coming back?"

The abrupt putting of this question caused Noel to put it abruptly to himself.

"I like this place. It has done my health immense good. And then I have met you here, and Bernard and the Pleuniers. I should like to come back."

"Then why not come, if you are staying on in Africa?"

"I shall certainly be in Africa for next winter."

"Then——"

"I must see. I must consider—things. One never knows what may happen, how things may turn out. I may be here again. But I'm not sure."

Sabatier did not insist. Probably he realized that the question of Noel's association with Aziza was being weighed in the balance. His sensitive lips moved in a slightly ironic smile. These strange desert loves seldom lasted very long, often had tragic and sometimes violent endings, or died out in the dust and ashes of misunderstanding and disgust. But how useless it would be to let Noel know what was passing through his mind. Sabatier knew how difficult, if not impossible, it is to mate sensual passion with cool reason, and he was not a man to attempt the impossible. This young Englishman, who at home wore the black garments and hat of his solemn profession, and to whom Sabatier had taken a liking that he sometimes wondered at in solitary moments, must go on his own way and learn his African lesson. So he only said, "I hope so" in comment on Noel's last words. And then they turned at once to the practical difficulties attendant on Aziza's transference from Touggourt to Tunis.

After a good deal of consultation, for this wasn't an easy, everyday matter, an idea, happy or not—who could be sure?—came to Sabatier's mind. He mentioned that there lived in Touggourt an old Russian doctor who had drifted there, no one knew why, and for years had earned a meagre living by the practice of his profession.

"I've heard of him," said Noel. "He attended Bernard after the Bedouin's attack on him. But what could he do for me?"

"He is horribly poor, always in need of money. He is very old. He must be well over seventy. But he's still fairly tough. Women don't trouble him. He's far beyond all that sort of thing. I know him. I might persuade him for a small sum of money, and of course travelling expenses, to

escort Aziza to Tunis. Being Russian, old, and long resident out here, there is nothing on this African earth that could possibly surprise, much less shock, him. Do you give me leave to try him?"

"Yes," said Noel enthusiastically. "If he'll do it what a godsend for me!"

Directly he had spoken the last words something in him that had been at home in Upper Green and perhaps was astray in North Africa was startled and shocked by them. But it seemed to him that he crushed it down as he added:

"Do go to him, Sabatier, and arrange it if possible. Let them start three days or so after I do. I'll give the old fellow my address in Sidi Bou Said. He must calculate, or perhaps you would for him, at what date Aziza and he could arrive in Tunis and let me know. I'll meet them at the station. I'll be there. And by that time I shall have found some place where Aziza can live. It must be in the Oriental quarter of the city. But I'll see to all that. Get him to do it. Persuade him. You arrange about the money. But one thing—will he talk?"

"Money will hold his lips silent. Besides, he is not a gossip like Father Anastase. He's an old hermit, a man of few words. He frequents no one. Just does what work he can find and, for the rest, keeps to himself. He hasn't an intimate in the place, I believe. It's the sort of life one wonders about and can never understand."

"Then do please see him! I trust everything to you. How you must begin to hate me!"

"Not yet!" said Sabatier, smiling without irony. "Give me time!"

Moved by an irresistible impulse, Noel grasped his muscular, though nervous hand.

"I sometimes wonder what you must think of me," he said with a sort of almost boyish anxiety.

"I think you are *very* human," said Sabatier. "Now let me go to Valinsky."

"Valinsky?"

"The old Russian boy."

"Oh, do go! I won't keep you!"

Noel's manner was almost hustling. Sabatier's eyes seemed to hold in their vivid blue depths a pitying expression as he went out.

"*Mon Dieu, comme il est jeune pour un homme de trente ans!*" he murmured to himself. "*Et moi?*"

A sigh followed the words.

Sabatier found old Valinsky not only willing to do what was asked of him but actually excited, not by the idea of conveying a young Ouled Nail to Tunis la Blanche, but by the prospect of increasing his meagre budget and seeing a new line of country. He would escape for a short period from the desert heat and the flies, and possibly this stranger, this love-making Roumi, might be induced to extend his patronage when Tunis was reached. In truth, he was mortally tired of Touggourt. Perhaps in Tunis he would find something to do. His weary old eye brightened at the thought, and his long and truly Russian resignation was abated.

After a lengthy interview with him Sabatier arranged a meeting between him and Noel, at which he would also be present. It took place at night in Sabatier's rooms.

Valinsky was the type of hairy old man, badly dressed, with weak legs, a scorbutic complexion, and wandering drunkard's eyes, that appears so often in Russian novels, his own enemy rather than anyone else's. To look at he was deplorable. When he spoke he seemed less so. There was a sort of fluid dignity about him. One could scarcely say he was a gentleman. Rather it seemed as if he might have been a gentleman once, in remote years and far away. He was scrupulously polite, though not servile, to Noel, whom he now looked upon as his patron and one who might become his benefactor. He agreed readily, in faulty French spoken with an extraordinary pronunciation, to everything that was proposed and seemed to think it the most natural thing in the world for a cultured Englishman of about thirty to be preparing to settle down in Tunisia for the summer with an Ouled Naïl dancing girl just verging on seventeen. But it was obvious that nothing on earth or in heaven could cause surprise in his withered mind. In a fairly brief conversation, the ground having been thoroughly prepared by Sabatier, everything was arranged. A sum of money was handed over by Noel, the date of departure fixed; the address of Noel at Sidi Bou Said was placed in the wavering old hands of Valinsky, which, nevertheless, were still capable of giving injections and performing simple operations, and it was settled that Sabatier and he would have an interview with the Maréchale and Aziza to tell them what was to be done. Valinsky spoke Arabic as fluently and faultily as he spoke French. Therefore, he would have no difficulty with either the Maréchale or Aziza. When he parted from Noel after their conversation was over he behaved as if they were old family friends and hinted that he was quite ready to resign his small practice in Touggourt and establish himself permanently in Tunis as Aziza's private medical attendant if Noel thought proper. Noel bade him good-bye and left, feeling that he had brought an unexpected ray of light into an old life that for years had been dark and dusty.

He was not present at the fateful interview with the Maréchale and Aziza but was informed of what took place by Sabatier. The Maréchale had been compliant, Aziza apparently delighted, earnestly, not ecstatically, at the prospect before her. He was highly surprised at the smoothness with which everything had gone and said so to Sabatier.

"Did you expect difficulties?" Sabatier said with, Noel thought a rather unusually sharp glance at him.

"I don't know. But when one wants anything very much something against it seems often to crop up in life. Don't you think so?"

Instead of replying to this Sabatier said:

"Are you one of those who are always prepared for the worst?"

"I'm not sure about that. But I think to have any great happiness must always seem rather surprising to anyone. Perhaps, though, you don't feel like that."

After a moment of apparent reflection Sabatier said:

"I believe I am a fatalist; ready for anything."

"Perhaps that makes for strength."

"I don't know that I am strong. But I should be very sorry and ashamed if I ever proved to be weak in a crisis," said Sabatier calmly and without the least touch of conceit. "Still one never knows for certain how one would be. Uncertainty is our everlasting nurse during our pilgrimage through the desert."

"You think of human life as a desert?"

"I do."

He smiled and added :

"But you must remember that the desert means a great deal to me."

Noel had been absolutely sincere when he said he believed that any great happiness must always seem surprising to the human being who had it, or even only lived in the full expectation of it. A well-known English proverb expresses concisely the reason for that human element of surprise, which was ever present in Noel during the few burning April days dividing him from the day of departure for Tunis. His preparations were well forward. The horses had already been sold. Amar had received his 'warning.' And now Noel was debating in his mind whether to retain Taha in his service or to give him a generous *pourboire* and drop him at Biskra on the way to Tunisia. He and Taha were to travel to Biskra by the diligence and would be there after about thirty hours' journey, spread over two days. He couldn't really like Taha. But Taha had been honest, or so Noel believed, in money matters ; he knew his job of servitude ; he had trained Noel to shoot with moderate success and to ride with much greater success. They had gone through a good deal together. A new attendant, engaged in Tunis or Sidi Bou Saïd, might have as many or more faults than Taha. Perhaps it would be better to stick to him. Noel had no illusions about Taha's having possibly some affection for him. He was sure Taha had none and would see him die with indifference if any money was coming to himself from that death. But he was accustomed to Taha and he presently came to the conclusion to stick to him, provided that Taha agreed to be stuck to.

"I am going to spend the summer in Sidi Bou Saïd near Tunis," he finally said.

"I knowin' !" said Taha.

"Would you like to come with me there ?"

"Of course I comin with you, Mister Nowill. What you doin without me ?"

Noel felt nettled by this complacent remark.

"Tunis peoples very bad peoples," continued Taha. "They robbin you if I not there to stoppin them."

"I don't need your help for anything of that kind," said Noel sharply. "And what about your two wives at Biskra ?"

"They stoppin in the house till I comin back. I not botherin about them."

'Happy women !' thought Noel. 'What a simple business a North African marriage seems to be !'

"Well, perhaps I'll take you with me," he said. "But if I do I don't promise to keep you all through the summer. That will depend."

He did not say on what.

"Of course I shall pay your fare back to Biskra in any case. The same wages as you have now."

But there came the inevitable protest. Wages, it seemed, were always much higher in Tunis than in Algeria. Why ? Because work there was more difficult and trying, and the inhabitants of Tunisia were entirely incapable of performing it. In consequence labour had to be transferred from Algeria to meet the necessities of Tunisia, and labour brought from a distance was always more highly paid than labour contracted for on the spot. Mister Nowill would understand that and would . . .

At this point in the argument Mister Nowill intimated that he would not pay a sou more in Tunisia than he was paying in Touggourt. Taha at once collapsed and placed himself unreservedly at Mister Nowill's disposal. He did not care about money. All he cared about was to watch over Noel's interests and to protect him from bandits and ruffians who were to be found roaming all over Tunisia. Upon this satisfactory understanding Taha was informed that he was re-engaged for the time.

So that was settled, and Noel felt perhaps for the best. He would have enough to do, when he arrived in Tunisia, in finding suitable quarters for Aziza and a woman attendant for her, without having to look about for a man to take the place of Taha. As the day for departure drew near he became more and more conscious of the difficulties and necessities connected with his strange enterprise. But he would overcome them. In Tunis he would immediately pay off and get rid of the old Russian and take entire charge of Aziza. He would find a couple of rooms for her in the Oriental quarter of Tunis and a decent woman to wait upon and look after her, someone who was thoroughly at home in the city. How he was going to unearth this 'decent woman' and what she would think of Aziza, he did not know. But he would not let his mind brood over possible difficulties and disasters. To do that would only enfeeble his will and cast a shadow across his happiness. The main thing was to get away from Touggourt and to get Aziza away, without Madame de Pleunier finding out what he had arranged and what was being done. He became more and more intent upon secrecy. Sometimes it seemed to him astonishing that what so many people in Touggourt knew, or must suspect, had never come to her knowledge. But it was evident that she knew nothing. Hassan must have held his tongue. Even Father Anastase, in spite of his fanatical envy of the pleasures of others, unshared by him, and the venom that in consequence devoured him, could not have spoken. Nevertheless, Noel knew that his mind would only be completely at ease when he and Aziza were safely away from Touggourt and Madame de Pleunier was on her way to the pleasures of Paris. About the following winter he was determined not to trouble. He had promised that Aziza should come back to the women's quarter in Touggourt and had formerly looked forward to another winter in Touggourt for himself. And even now he did not wish this possibility to be taken from him by the mortal enmity of the Commandant of the region's wife, which he knew must be roused in Madame de Pleunier if she ever came to know of his plan for the summer and of his carrying out of it. But the future must take care of itself. He said that to himself with *naïveté*. He might never come back to Touggourt. Perhaps he would spend a winter in Bou Saada, within reach of Bernard. Perhaps he and Aziza . . .

But it was useless and absurd to rush forward in thought. Sufficient for the day was the wonder thereof. He was on the edge of a great adventure. Destiny had led him into a land of romance.

Every night now, when darkness had fallen, he went to the women's courtyard, but not till the hour when he knew that Aziza would be free from the dancing house. Although in a way he was grateful to the Maréchale and had almost come to have respect for her power over others, which in one case had been used to his great advantage, he could not help detesting her character as he knew it, and to sit with her and the eunuch waiting for Aziza's arrival in search of her key was unbearable to him. He came late,

therefore, paid a visit of ceremony to the Maréchale to salute her, was graciously received, was offered coffee, touched it with his lips, and then returned to the courtyard, where almost directly he was rejoiced by the vision of Aziza passing by in her jewels and finery, her performance finished. Usually she wore the green shawl, worn by her on the fateful night when he had encountered her for the first time in the alley of the dancing house between the white lines of staring desert men and had been startled by her strange beauty. He thought of that shawl as an emblem of happiness and satisfaction of desire. She would smile faintly as she passed by him. In her long eyes he saw a promise. He went to wait by the locked door of her chamber. Soon she came to him without her jewels and coins but still wrapped in the bright green shawl, her key in her hand. The strong palm-wood door on which the Bedouin had played such fierce music was opened ; a candle was lit. Noel followed her in, and the door was locked. The night with its thousand eyes was shut out. Noel's world was confined within the narrow space of a little room with four whitewashed walls on which were crudely painted grotesque animals. And the Bedouin came no more to disturb his happiness.

On April the ninth, three days before the day Noel had decided on for his departure with Taha, he received another invitation to dine at the Commandant's house. Would he come on the tenth to a farewell dinner, the last of that season, though, Madame de Pleunier hoped, not the last of that year? She was looking forward to many pleasant meetings when they would both have returned to the desert next winter, and she hoped Noel felt as she did. Enough of the desert now for both of them. Paris for her and then visits in various châteaux ; Sidi Bou Said for him, and, she felt sure, an agreeable though quiet summer. Then they would be ready for the desert again. She confessed to being tired of it now. Nevertheless, it had a spell. And one became aware of that when one was about to leave it. Didn't Noel agree with her? No more cordial note had ever come from her to him. Of course he must accept, though it meant a whole night away from Aziza. For Noel was sure that the Commandant would again provide a soldier to guard him on a compulsory return to the camp. He accepted. She still didn't know what he had done and was going to do. She should never know.

His feeling of complete safety was fortified. Even he began to have the dangerous belief that he was a child of good luck. The blaze of the sun was over him now. The flies were becoming intolerable in their attentions. But the blue sea and the white village above it were waiting for him. He felt like one on the top of the world and went to the women's courtyard that night in wonderful spirits, inclined to shower kindness on everyone whom he met.

He was getting on well with his Arabic and could now have slight talks with Aziza and understand a good deal of what she said in reply. With others he was less ready, though he could give orders to Amar. With Taha he still spoke always in English.

Feeling so happy and full of anticipation when he entered the courtyard, he resolved to wait for Aziza in the Maréchale's room and try some of his Arabic on her, instead of, as usual, staying only till the coffee was brought and leaving her directly he had put his cup to his lips. Even to her he was ready to be benign. Soon he would see her no more and Aziza would be

free from her jurisdiction. Although he knew he had only bought her he felt almost as if he had triumphed over her in a severe contest in which he had been cleverer than she had. In the money matter he had stood up to her, and his threat, conveyed to her by Sabatier, had brought her to heel. He wondered whether she hated him. That evening he felt that he didn't hate her.

She was sitting with two Spahis when he walked in upon her. They were all smoking, and the coffee tray was already prepared. Both the Spahis looked quite young. One sat on a stool. The other lounged on the enormous bed. Both, of course, had spurs on their long riding boots and wore their red cloaks. They were smoking cigarettes. The Maréchale had her keef pipe.

As he came in Noel, assuming his deepest voice, solemnly uttered the customary Arab greeting, to which the Maréchale and the Spahis replied, and the Spahi on the stool got up to give room to Noel and sprang up to sit on the bed by his comrade.

The Maréchale pointed to the stool and clapped her hands for another cup to be brought. This was carried in immediately by the Negress. Noel drank a few drops of the sweet thick liquid, put down his cup, and complete silence reigned. No doubt the Maréchale expected him, as usual, to go out and wait in the courtyard for Aziza, but Noel had come to her room that night meaning to stay till Aziza came for her key, and though he now felt embarrassed his under mood of good spirits and triumph made him determined to stay. Why should he recoil before these desert men, who lounged on the great bed in taciturn silence, watching him with their burning eyes? He resolved to stop where he was till Aziza came.

Arabs, though often fiercely talkative among themselves, seem able to be completely at ease when sitting together, or even in the company of strangers, in absolute silence. Apparently they feel no social obligation to keep up conversation. Noel had become aware of this. And though, unlike his company, he now felt self-conscious he calmly lit a cigarette and, having finished his coffee, joined in the silence that reigned in the Maréchale's room.

What was she thinking about? What were these two young men, burned almost black by the desert sun, thinking of as they gazed at the Roumi who had intruded among them? Did they know of his desert love? Did they know that one of their women, the loveliest and the youngest, was within a few days of leaving them and their ways and their desires to throw in her lot with him? For how long? Noel wouldn't let his mind dwell on that. He was conscious of an immense remoteness, like a great stretch of desert, dividing him from these men and this feathered and decorated woman smoking her little black pipe of keef on the divan. And Aziza belonged essentially to them. This fact was borne in upon him during the silence, seemed to come upon him with the impact of a blow. He had something to overcome. He must overcome it during the long heats of summer. That great stretch of human desert remoteness dividing him from Aziza still—he must travel across it. Would it be hard going? Would he reach his goal? Would she at last learn to understand him and he learn to understand her? He looked across at the two men on the bed wrapped in their great red cloaks. Below their beautifully folded turbans, which gave height and dignity to them, their fiery dark eyes looked back at him in the rather dim light, rendered more dim by the smoke. And his soul was full of the weight of human misunderstanding.



Fortunately Aziza came from the dancing house that night rather sooner than usual. When she entered the room, tinkling in her anklets and bracelets and wearing the bright green shawl, the two Spahis got up from the bed, greeted her, cast a long searching glance at her and from her to Noel, and went slowly out of the room. They murmured something in deep voices to Noel as they left. No doubt it was an Arab farewell. He replied to it with an Arabic salutation, also delivered with deep solemnity and a grave countenance.

Aziza looked after the Spahis as they left. Her face showed no feeling. She simply observed a departure. Then she greeted Noel and went up to the Maréchale to take off her coins and jewels, which would be at once laid away in the painted wooden coffer belonging to her and guarded till the following evening. While this was going forward Noel took his seat again on the stool and looked on without saying a word. But he meant to try to say something in Arabic before he went away with Aziza, something that would impress the Maréchale with a sense of his importance and prevent her from taking advantage of his absence on the following night to betray his enforced appearance of trust in her bona fides.

When Aziza was ready to go she put a soft little hand on his arm and said in Arabic the word 'Come !'

"Wait !" he said. "Maréchale—I want speak."

Aziza immediately took her hand from his arm and waited submissively, while the Maréchale raised her heavy eyebrows in apparent surprise and looked interrogative. Then Noel made his effort. Speaking very slowly, he said :

"To-morrow I eat with Commandant. Then coming here."

(The latter sentence was a lie. He knew he would have to go back to camp escorted by a soldier.)

"Understand ?" he added sternly.

The great lady understood, nodded, and smiled with what seemed to be majestic approval. Then she turned to Aziza and spoke to her, evidently in explanation of what Noel had stated and perhaps also in admonition. She then said something to Noel which unfortunately he failed to grasp. He pretended to understand her, however, took his leave, and went off with Aziza, who carried her door-key.

Later on in his life he often remembered in every detail that night. There was no passion in it ; there was no sensuality. Noel was moved to try for a different intimacy than that of the body. Knowing what was ahead of him, the long summer in Tunisia with Aziza as his only companion, he tried for a beginning of something like domesticity. He avoided all violent demonstrations of affection. He was very gentle with Aziza, treating her as a precious thing to be handled with care and respected as well as loved. There came to him a longing to impress on her girlish mind the difference between an affection, such as his was now going to be, and the sort of love she must expect from a desert man.

She must learn to know a new side of him, the European side. He would teach her. He would open her eyes on new country. By doing this he would gradually change her, draw her nearer to his true self. What did she know of that yet ? Her fascination of strangeness had always great power over him. He connected it with the region in which he had come to know it and to which it belonged. Romance attended it. He was still like a boy in the golden land of romance. Unlike Madame de Pleunier, he had not 'found

out' North Africa yet, grown weary of its dust-laden reality. And even she the other day had acknowledged that at moments she felt its spell. How much more must it be felt by him who was much younger than she was, inexperienced and new to it. But though he had been drawn to Aziza partly because of her strangeness and would not have had it away, that night he had an intense new desire to create between them the beginning of a deeper intimacy than had been theirs until now. It would, it must, be difficult to establish. He knew that. But if they were to be completely happy together during the summer months—and perhaps later, but he would not look too far forward into the future—such an intimacy must be created somehow. He rejected the thought of impossibility. Where there's a will there's a way. And now that he was on the edge of an experience so hazardous but so romantic and wonderful and, he was sure, so unusual, there was an uprush of will in him.

When the strong door was shut and locked, two candles lit, as well as a little oil lamp, its flame sheltered by blue glass, Aziza went behind a flimsy curtain of white cotton, spangled with a pretence of yellow stars which rather resembled a rash, and after staying there for a time came out with a tray on which was mint tea. Meanwhile Noel, having thrown off his burnous, had extracted from his jacket pocket the shiny black book which contained his French-Arabic vocabulary, conversational sentences and grammar, and was studying it earnestly. But when the tea came he laid it down on the narrow divan, which had none of the softness of Sabatier's in the shadowy room of the carpets. Aziza took her seat beside him. He put an arm round her soft neck, touching the silky skin with his fingers, and they sipped tea together. Now and then Noel kissed her, but with gentleness, as someone may kiss a child without expecting return. And Aziza seemed quite satisfied to be treated so gently, almost with a pretty respect. Perhaps the novelty of it gratified her. For respect was not often her portion. With the Maréchale she knew authority, with men something else. In reply to Noel's quiet caresses she stroked his cheek and now and then touched his thick hair. But when they had finished the mint tea and lit their cigarettes and he still sat quietly beside her with an arm round her neck, saying nothing, she began to look puzzled. He noticed this and resolved to draw her if possible into his mood. Of course she could not be feeling as he felt. He must not expect her to react to his feelings yet with any real understanding. But perhaps in time—ah, that monster Time can sometimes be tamed and made useful! He would rely on time. And now he resorted to his book, and they had what he called a conversation.

He said most of the phrases he knew. Aziza responded, when she understood his meaning, and now and then started subjects of her own and left him floundering. Then after smiling, even laughing at him, she fell silent, waiting for him to recover and speak again.

Presently, after they had both sat in silence for several minutes, Noel said in Arabic:

"Soon we going to Tunis."

Aziza replied softly. He squeezed her neck, just enough to show fondness, and continued:

"Always together in Tunis."

She smiled, showing perfect little teeth, white from sucking the sugar cane. Encouraged by her smile, he uttered two words in English, which

even some of the Arabs in this French colony of North Africa had somehow picked up.

"Very nice!" he said earnestly.

Aziza, still smiling, repeated:

"Very nice!"

Coming from her lips, the words sounded sarcastic, almost like a sneer. But Noel had several times noticed that when people say words whose meaning they don't really understand their voices have an ironical sound. Nevertheless, he wished to hear Aziza say those English words differently, and he again said, "Very nice," this time with enthusiasm. She again repeated the words, and again they sounded sarcastic.

He shook his head. She looked completely puzzled. He gave it up. He didn't like to hear her say English words and tried French.

"*Très heureux à Tunis!*" he said. "*Toujours heureux!*"

Then she looked vague, and a dreamy expression came into her eyes. He wondered why. Had she understood this time? He pressed her close to him and shut his eyes. For a moment he was living their life in Tunisia. Some day they would be able to talk to each other freely. He was determined to master Arabic thoroughly and he knew he could do it. In Tunis he would find a first-rate teacher. All through the summer he would work at Arabic. By the winter he would be able to speak fluently. He knew and trusted his powers as a student. Some day he and Aziza would chatter together. But now it was difficult, very difficult. Nevertheless, still keeping his eyes shut—why, he did not know—and pressing Aziza close to him, he repeated, "*Très heureux à Tunis! Toujours heureux!*"

Then he added a word to the last sentence and said softly:

"*Toujours heureux ensemble!*"

There was silence for an instant. Then he heard Aziza's voice murmur with a droll accent that somehow touched him:

"*Toujours heureux ensemble!*"

He wondered whether she understood a few words of French. It might be so since she was living in a French colony. Or was she merely repeating his words like a parrot, filled with the spirit of imitation and perhaps smiling at her own cleverness? He opened his eyes. She was not smiling. Her long eyes still held a dreamy expression, and her face was very serious.

Then he felt sure that she did understand what he had said and she had repeated and that she was dreaming happily of the future with him in Tunisia.

And he was very happy and full of confidence in that future.

In her invitation to him Madame de Pleunier had not mentioned that she would be alone for dinner. Perhaps, therefore, the Commandant would be there, and possibly other guests. Noel would have preferred to find her alone. He was interested in her and was beginning to feel fairly at ease when with her now he had become certain that she knew nothing about his association with Aziza. He was grateful to her for the trouble she had taken about Sidi Bou Said and for the cordiality and hospitality she had shown to him with increasing amiability. Yet he did not exactly 'like' her. When he thought over their connection he had to abolish that much-used word from his mind. There was something in her, even much, perhaps, that he did not understand and that he felt he might perhaps dislike if he understood it. Nevertheless, without precisely liking her yet, Noel liked to be

with her in quiet intimacy, and he hoped she would be alone for the dinner.

She was not alone, however. When he arrived at the Commandant's house he found her in the drawing-room with her husband and a lady. (In those days gentlewomen were commonly called ladies.) This lady was of middle height, had a quantity of silvery white hair with a curious shine in it, and dark eyes that Noel thought held a gleam of acute intelligence. In spite of her white hair she did not look old. She might be, he thought, not more than fifty. Madame de Pleunier introduced him to her.

"My English friend, Mr. Noel Herriot—Madame de Varenne."

And she added to Noel immediately :

"Madame de Varenne is my friend from Sidi Bou Saïd, about whom I told you, and about her wonderful home overlooking the gates of Africa. She lent it to me for one summer, if you remember. She has just arrived unexpectedly to spend a few days with me. I shall delay my departure to Paris for a week, and we shall travel there together."

Noel, who had received a slight shock upon hearing who the guest was, felt relieved by the last words. This very interesting-looking woman, with eyes full of keen intelligence, would not be in Sidi Bou Saïd when he arrived there. Thank God for that. He wondered why Madame de Varenne had undertaken the long and arduous journey from Sidi Bou Saïd to Touggourt, merely to stay there for a few days, when she could have taken a ship from Tunis to Marseille, if she was going to Paris, and been there in a couple of nights. Surely some very imperative reason must have brought her so far. That did not concern him, however, and he dismissed the matter from his mind.

Madame de Varenne spoke English, not so well as Madame de Pleunier, but much better than the Commandant, and she soon put Noel at his ease with her.

During the dinner he realized two or three things about her.

The first was that she must be a very intimate friend of Madame de Pleunier's. He even felt that they were confidential friends, with probably a complete understanding of each other's characters, and that they had a genuine regard for each other. A second thing that he felt almost certain of and was surprised by was that, for some obscure reason, Madame de Varenne was considerably interested in him. And he did not feel that this interest was roused in her by meeting him and finding him interesting but that it was antecedent to that. It must therefore have been brought into being by some communication about him made to her by Madame de Pleunier. Noel did not feel specially that it was a friendly interest, and it certainly was not hostile. It merely caused Madame de Varenne to be closely observant of him and exceptionally intent upon him. It excluded indifference completely.

He felt rather flattered by it. It did not distress him. But it set him wondering very much what Madame de Pleunier could have written about him. For the communication must have been made by letter.

One other thing about Madame de Varenne which was borne in upon him was that she was very acute, highly educated, and had a serious nature. She did not show very much humour, though there was nothing heavy or solemn about her.

But he felt that she had no frivolity and confronted life rather in a grave than in an ironic spirit. He also felt that she must know a very great deal

about life, far more than he did, though perhaps not more than Madame de Pleunier.

He liked her and fancied that, if she knew of it, she might appreciate the student spirit in him which seemed to have fallen entirely into abeyance in the desert. That spirit might bore Madame de Pleunier. It would not bore Madame de Varenne, at any rate if delivered in small doses. He did not know whether she was a kind woman. But he did not feel in her hardness or bitterness such as he was sometimes aware of in Madame de Pleunier.

After dinner the Commandant excused himself. He was obliged to go to his office, as he called it, and do some writing. Noel remained, therefore, alone with the two women and had quite a pleasant time with them. Of course the subject of Sidi Bou Saïd came up for discussion, and Noel found out that Madame de Varenne had a deep affection for her home there and even felt about it romantically. She must be full of the spirit of the place. Much of what she said fascinated him and made him more glad than ever that his summer would be spent there. He told her that and, when he did so, noticed that she glanced at Madame de Pleunier and then back again at him.

"I know Sir Thomas Challoner's house," she said. "It is very simple and unpretentious, but I think you will like it. I'm sorry I shall not be in Sidi Bou Saïd when you are. But I shall be away till the late autumn, and so will my husband."

"What a pity!" Noel forced himself to say.

As he said the last word it seemed to him that for the first time that evening he detected a faintly ironical look in Madame de Varenne's acutely intelligent eyes. But it was succeeded immediately by a rare smile. She was evidently not much given to smiling, though she did not, on the other hand, look severe.

Soon after half-past ten Noel got up to go. When he did that, as if recollecting something Madame de Pleunier said in a casual voice:

"By the way, I know you are interested as a newcomer here in the ways and customs of the indigènes, aren't you?"

"Yes—very!" said Noel.

"Then I wonder if you would care to come over to-morrow morning about half-past ten. I heard this afternoon that one of the Ouled Naïl women, who has, it seems, accumulated enough dowry by the practice of her peculiar profession to indulge in the luxury of domestic happiness and North African ideas of respectability, is leaving the Quartier des Femmes about eleven o'clock to go to the home of the husband who has apparently come forward and offered to take charge of her and her dowry. This means a little fête. It might be amusing to see it. I shall be going. And you are coming, too, are not you, Marguerite?"

"Yes, I should like to come. I have never seen an Ouled Naïl's departure from her companions. We have no such ceremony at Sidi Bou Saïd."

"Well, will you come, Mr. Herriot?"

"Yes, I shall be delighted to."

"About half-past ten, shall we say?"

"Thank you very much. I'll be there."

Then he said good night.

As he had anticipated, he found a soldier outside the house door, waiting

to escort him back to the camp. He walked home, followed by his guard, thinking over the events of the evening in a not unhappy mood under the stars.

When he woke up in the morning, after a night of profound and dreamless sleep, he was conscious at once that he had something special to look forward to, not merely the usual ride round the oasis or a shooting expedition to the salt marshes. He sat up in his camp bed and thought :

‘What is it ?’

And then immediately he remembered. He had to go to the Commandant’s house to fetch Madame de Pleunier and Madame de Varenne and escort them to the little fête of the Ouled Nail woman who was going away to be married. He had never seen such a fête, as it was generally called by the French, who sometimes used that word instead of the desert term ‘fantasia.’ But he had heard about it from Taha. There was nothing much in it evidently, but it was characteristic. The expectant bride rode away from the Quartier des Femmes on a camel posed on high in a palanquin of gaudily coloured draperies which ballooned round her with the slow movement of the beast. The camel was decorated, either with garlands of real flowers or with artificial streamers of paper imitations, and was followed out of the city for a short distance into the desert by all the Ouled Nail women, dressed up in their most elaborate finery and wearing their jewels, and by a crowd of curious and admiring natives. The Ouled Nail women’s voices were raised in the shrill birdlike twittering with which they greet every joyous departure from the normal native life. Sometimes guns were fired by admirers of the young, or not very young, lady. And the procession trailed out into the sands till everyone had had enough of the jubilation. Then there was a pause. The crowd and the dancers stood still, and the camel with its attendants moved slowly and solemnly away into the vastness of the Sahara, pursued by the farewell twitterings of those who must still carry on their profession which the destined bride was resigning for ever.

Nothing very wonderful. Still it would be worth seeing, at any rate for once. And Noel made his toilet and sat down to his breakfast in a mood of expectation. He was feeling well, even gay, and was eagerly looking forward to his departure, although his eagerness was companioned by the mild sensation of regret that in sensitive people generally attends the conclusion of a phase of life which has been interesting and novel, and the anticipation of the unknown.

At breakfast he told Taha what he was going to do that morning, and Taha, who was bound for the market place to lay in provisions and carry out some secret plan of his own—for Amar often did the marketing unless it was arranged otherwise between them—observed that he would honour the fête with his presence. Apparently he had not heard of it until Noel told him.

“Woman very happy !” he remarked. “Very glad to get marryin ! Had enough dancin—”

He broke off and then added :

“And all *that*. Husband much better.”

He left Noel wondering more than ever at the extraordinary *mœurs* of the Sahara, to which he could never get really accustomed in spite of the alteration they had made in his own way of life.

Taha's statement that he would be at the fête made Noel suddenly realize that of course Aziza would be there too. Oddly he had not realized that till now. One of those strange mental lapses which can seldom be accounted for. All the Ouled Naïls would doubtless be present, headed by the Maréchale. And Aziza would be among them. He would see her when he was in the company of Madame de Pleunier and Madame de Varenne. The conviction of this made him feel self-conscious and even slightly nervous, but also excited. When he thought of the two very experienced Frenchwomen a slight feeling of guilt also crept through him. Of course Aziza would be discreet if by chance they and he came near her. She would never give any sign of recognition. But still . . .

He finished his breakfast and had a pipe. His slight uneasiness had died away quickly, and he felt very happy and in a looking-forward mood. The Ouled Naïl bride was going away to her new life, and soon Aziza would go to hers. Escorted by the old Russian, Valinsky. A very different departure. No camel, no garlands of flowers, no music, twittering women, and firing of guns. Valinsky and she would go by the diligence to Biskra and there take the train to Tunis. And one day soon Noel would meet them at the station of Tunis and escort Aziza to the rooms he had found for her in the native quarter.

That was her destiny. And his? But he would not look very far forward into the future in spite of his mood. It was time to be off, and he knocked out his pipe.

The heat was intense that day with a burning intensity, and he gave himself time to walk slowly over the flat to the city in the eye of the sun. At the Commandant's house he found Madame de Pleunier and Madame de Varenne ready to go. Wonderful women, not to keep a man waiting! Both were dressed in white and wore hats wreathed in transparent veils. And both carried sun umbrellas. Madame de Pleunier, he thought, had a rather roguish look which he had never noticed in her before. Madame de Varenne looked grave and intensely vital. She must have a very animated mind, but her body did not seem restless. He began to like this animation of mind in a tranquil body. Madame de Pleunier interested him, and so did Madame de Varenne, but in a different way.

"What a fierce morning!" said Madame de Pleunier as they set out. "It is time to be off. I am looking forward to cooler climes."

"And are you looking forward to Sidi Bou Saïd, Monsieur Noel?" said Madame de Varenne.

"Yes, I am, although I have never seen it. But I have imagined it."

"Sometimes imagination outruns the reality. But I don't think you will be disappointed with Sidi Bou Saïd. Every year I care for it more and more. And I think it's unique."

"I wonder which you look forward to most," said Noel. "To Paris when you leave Sidi Bou Saïd, or to Sidi Bou Saïd when you are going to return to it."

"Yes, which, Marguerite?" said Madame de Pleunier.

"I can answer that. To Sidi Bou Saïd when I leave Paris."

"I have a feeling I'm going to love it," Noel couldn't help saying.

But directly he had said it he wondered whether he had not perhaps shown too much enthusiasm in speaking like that about a place he had never seen. He was linking it in his mind with a girl. But they could not know that.

They showed no surprise, however. And now they came out into the fly-infested uproar of the market-place.

"How disgustingly human this is!" said Madame de Pleunier. "The enforced physical intimacy of these people, which they obviously enjoy, always makes me feel how utterly different we are from them. They are as intimate with each other as the flies are and as casual about it."

"We are lonely compared with them," said Madame de Varenne.

"Physically?" said Madame de Pleunier.

"And mentally, too, I believe. Since I have lived so much in North Africa I have come to the conclusion that these people know far less about real loneliness of the spirit than we do, we Europeans. Of course there are Europeans who live crowded together in cities. But even they, I am almost sure, know more of the meaning of solitude than these Africans do. I have often heard Europeans of the poorer classes—I know something of them—say, 'I have no real friends!' or 'I never make friends!' I don't believe any African here would say that or has ever self-consciously thought it. Still—how are we to know? There's the barrier of race between us. Do we turn down here?"

"Yes. It isn't far. We shall soon be in the Avenue de Biskra."

Presently they turned again to the left by the low arcade that sheltered the café of keef smokers, untenanted at this hour, and the broad sandy Avenue de Biskra, leading straight to the desert, stretched before them. In the distance they could just see the beginning of the vast sands, or could have seen but for the figures of the many people who were gathered by the wall of the Quartier des Femmes and who intercepted the view, except at moments when they moved and opened out, and the pale vista of the desert became visible beyond the slightly rising ground that led out of the city.

"I believe we are late," said Madame de Pleunier. "Hark! There is the music! And look! There's a white camel just rising. One of the trotting dromedaries. Rare beasts! And a palanquin on it! The future bride must be hidden in that, or half seen. These women like to show themselves even on such an occasion as this when they are retiring from their amiable profession."

The irrepressible bitterness which Noel had noticed once or twice in her voice sounded again as she said that. They hastened their steps.

"Why, there is another camel!" she added as, with the invariable roar of protest, a second beast slowly reared itself up in the midst of the crowd. "Can there be two brides? I heard about one. But who is the other?"

When she said that Noel looked at her in surprise. Why did she say 'who' in that almost intimate way? But no doubt she meant, 'who—not the bride we have heard about.' That must be it. And now his attention was engrossed by what was going on in the crowd which began to throng about them as they moved forward to see better.

Both the camels were white. One was decorated with garlands of artificial flowers. The other had only a string of coloured beads round its neck. Both carried palanquins and both had elaborate trappings of stuffs embroidered with silver. Madame de Pleunier, Madame de Varenne, and Noel saw them only from behind and could not see the women who rode in them. Camel men stood beside the beasts, ready to lead them forward when the signal was given. In front of them at a little distance was a man mounted on a big Arab horse and holding a gun. He wore a burnous and the headdress of a Bedouin. Behind the two camels were the musicians from the dancing



house producing their habitual frenzied uproar, mingled with the shrieking and drumming which excited the passions of men and urged them to the chambers of women which surrounded the great courtyard.

The solitary horseman lifted his gun and fired it. There was a swaying movement of the crowd away from the door of the courtyard, and the Ouled Nail women streamed out into the blaze of the sunshine like a flock of macaws, twittering shrilly as a sign of their joy and triumph.

Another of them riding off with her dowry! Another woman grown rich from the passions of men! Another dancer who need dance no more! Another prostitute passing into the realm of respectability, saluted, honoured, and probably envied! All the colours of the rainbow and many more were flaunted to do justice to her fête and her glory! There were violets, scarlets, pinks, yellows, azure blues, and deep purples! There were silver and gold, peony reds, and the brightest vermillion. And there was, queen of the riot of colour, magenta, crude as the bougainvillæa which streams over the white walls of Africa. Shawls of various hues were flung over shoulders. Feathers and crowns decorated heads piled with false hair. Coins of gold were hung around necks and streamed over bosoms. Arms were heavy with bracelets of metal in which were embedded strange stones. Even ankles were circled with metal. Fingers and toenails were touched with the henna, and some tresses of hair were dyed with it. Macaws undoubtedly, human macaws, but they twittered instead of squawked.

"Aren't they simply terrible in the sunshine?" Madame de Pleunier said as they gathered behind the two camels. "How *can* anyone——?"

She broke off abruptly, realizing that Noel was not listening to what she was saying. His eyes were fixed on the Ouled Nails, who were now lifting their arms and increasing their twitters in a crescendo.

Where was the bright green shawl? Noel could not find it among the shawls of the Ouled Nails. Where was the Maréchale, mother of the maids? His eyes searched eagerly, almost feverishly, but in vain. Madame de Pleunier laid a hand on his arm.

"Aren't they simply terrible in the sunrays?" she said in a hard voice.

Noel started and looked down at her hand in its loose white glove.

"Oh!" he said. "I do beg your pardon. I didn't—— Look, the camels are moving! Who's the man on the horse?"

"The prospective bridegroom, perhaps."

"And where are they going?"

"To the woman's future home, I suppose."

"Are they married already?"

"I doubt it. There will be another festivity for the marriage feast, I expect."

Following the camels, the Ouled Nails moved forward in a compact mass of colour, always twittering at the tops of their voices. The crowd went with them, and, as if impelled and almost in spite of themselves, Madame de Pleunier and Noel moved too. Bang-bang went the gun of the horseman who led the procession. The travelling music seemed to become more strident with every move forward, more defiant and angry, as if determined to insult the Sahara.

"But why are *we* doing this?" said Madame de Varenne in her grave voice.

"Doing what, *chère Marguerite*?"

"Going with them? What are they all going to do?"

Madame de Pleunier glanced at Noel, who was still searching the crowd for the Maréchale and Aziza. He did not notice her glance.

Raising her voice, she said :

"I think they are only going a little way to the desert edge to see the last of the bride, or brides. They'll stop there most likely and twitter them on their way. As we've come so far we ought to see the final farewell. Don't you think so, Mr. Herriot?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I think we certainly ought to. There's one thing I don't understand."

"What is it?"

"Why are there two camels, one decorated with garlands and the other not? Who can be in the second palanquin?"

"That puzzles me, too, as I said. I know the bride is in the first. And I know all about *her*."

"How d'you mean?" said Noel, astonished. "She's just one of the Ouled Naïls."

"Yes. But young Hassan told me. Do you remember one night when you met me and Captain Sabatier in the dancing house? Ages ago!"

"Yes; of course I do."

"Perhaps you've forgotten. But there was a girl dancing that night, one of the youngest. She wore a bright green shawl. She is on the decorated camel. The fête is for her."

Noel stopped in the sand. He felt as if his body was stricken with paralysis. But an Arab in the crowd jostled against him, and mechanically he moved on. In the midst of the music and the noise of shuffling slippered feet on the sand he heard a dialogue spoken by two women's voices.

One voice said :

"One of the *youngest*! But I thought it took a long time for them to earn enough for a dowry."

"I believe it does generally. Judging by the appearance of most of them, it must. And this girl really is young. Barely seventeen, I believe. She must have had luck. Anyhow, I know it is she. For Hassan found out and told me so only this morning, just before we started."

"How the other dancers must hate her!"

"They probably do. But hark how they twitter!"

"They are like us. There are things that are *de règle*. One is expected to do them and one does them, *bon gré, mal gré*. Ah, they are stopping!"

"Yes. This is the desert edge. Look at the sands. The poor things will surely be burned alive. But the bride, at any rate, will have to get accustomed to it."

"Why?"

"Hassan told me the man she is marrying is a Bedouin."

### PHASE THREE

### DISILLUSION

AN hour after midnight on April the thirtieth Noel clambered down to the platform of the Tunis station after the long and hot journey from Constantine. He felt exhausted both in body and mind and stood for a moment in the dark and sultry night, too vacant to make any effort either mental or physical. He was alone. He had paid Taha off in Biskra and left him to his two wives, protesting but in vain. Mister Nowill would be robbed and perhaps murdered in Tunis unless Taha was there to protect him.

"What do I care?" Noel had replied to these awful prophecies. "If I'm murdered that only matters to me. If I'm robbed that's my affair."

He was rigid in his determination to get rid of Taha, the man who knew too much.

It had been a tiring journey from Touggourt to Tunis, broken by a period of rest in Biskra. There had been first the long and exhausting two days' journey to Biskra through the desert in the diligence. The train journey had taken two more days. The train had seemed almost to creep along in the intense heat. But Noel's present weariness and vacancy had been brought about by his condition of mind rather than by his condition of body. He was the prey of an exhausted mind.

Even at that dead hour of the night the station was alive with native porters shouting in apparently fierce excitement, and one of them, with the agility of a great cat, sprang up into the train and hanked down Noel's belongings. Another reached out a black hand for the ticket of his registered luggage, snatched it from him, and made off, shouting into the darkness.

Accompanied by the first porter, Noel wandered towards the exit and presently found himself in a fiacre drawn by two lean horses jingling toward a hotel through the unknown city, saying to himself, 'Why am I here? What have I to do here?'

All he wanted at that moment was to tumble into a bed, to be in blackness and silence, to be lost in sleep.

They drew up at the Hôtel de France. A French night porter with grim disillusioned eyes said that the hotel was quite full. There was a congress of winegrowers going on in the city, and all the hotels were crammed. Nevertheless, on the advice of his Maltese driver Noel went from hotel to hotel and was refused admittance everywhere by indifferent night porters. "*Non, non! Impossible! Pas de chambre ici.*"

"*Que faire?*" he muttered at last to his cabman.

The man, with a twisted grin, simian yet not quite unfriendly, said something in broken French, spoken with a strong foreign accent. Noel seemed to gather that the man was suggesting something, perhaps that he should sleep out all night in the harbour, and nodded absently. Anything! Anything! He was ready for anything. Or, more truly, he was ready for nothing but resigned to everything. The man drove on down several narrow and empty streets, almost like alleys, and finally drew up before a dimly lit

doorway. Noel peered out with dull eyes and saw an empty paved lobby, with walls partially whitewashed, partially covered with blue, white, green, and yellow Tunisian tiles, and part of a staircase of tiles. Coming from above down this staircase to him was a sound of music, not such fierce music as he had heard in the Touggourt dancing house, but a thrumming as of guitars and the fragile sound of a reed flute.

Music at nearly two o'clock in the night ! A strange hotel surely ! He wondered—vaguely.

The Maltese coachman got down and, still grinning in monkey-like fashion, said in his broken French that Noel could get a bedroom here. Wondering how the man could know that, Noel got out and, accompanied by him, mounted the staircase and came upon a sort of hall, in which were seated two very large and sultry-looking women, with jet black hair, in which were stuck bright red flowers. They were gaudily dressed and heavily painted in red and black, cheeks and eyebrows, and received him with glittering smiles of welcome, showing a good deal of precious metal in the teeth. The music issued from a lighted room on the right from which came, too, a sound of voices and laughter.

Noel realized that this must be a brothel and that the large women who smiled on him with such energy thought he was a customer convoyed to them by the Maltese, who would touch a commission.

Well—what did it matter ? He did not care what they thought, what anyone thought. Indeed, was not the situation appropriate ? He journeyed from one brothel, that at Touggourt, to another. Evidently brothels were the appropriate place for him ! But he must try to explain that all he wanted now was a room to himself for the remainder of the night and complete undisturbed repose. Let others scramble after so-called pleasure and dissipation if they would. He needed rest and oblivion for a few hours. Could he get them here ?

With the assistance of the Maltese, who spoke fluently the language of the country, the situation was at last made clear to the two ladies, who were obviously surprised by the stranger's indifference to fascination, but finally were brought to accept it as a fact that must be faced with resignation. And eventually Noel found himself in a quite clean chamber, long and narrow, with whitewashed and tiled walls, a bit of carpet on a paved floor, and a large and voluptuous bed. His luggage was bestowed along one wall—there was just enough room to contain it—the Maltese driver was thanked and paid, after assuring Noel earnestly that he would be there on the following morning to assist in removing the baggage and in helping Noel in all his enterprises, and Noel at last sank into bed and fell asleep with the faint sounds of the guitars and flute still haunting his ears.

He slept till very late on the following morning. His Maltese friend had been waiting patiently for two hours, expectant of further custom from the rich Englishman who had arrived so late in the season from the south and who, no doubt, was going to explore the souks and environs of the white city. When finally he emerged from his room, rested, but still feeling strangely vacant and indifferent to everything, he found the man in the hall, sitting on the ladies' divan and smoking a dangerously black cigar, which stuck out aggressively from beneath a pair of gigantic moustaches.

Noel was faintly glad to see him. Wasn't he the only friend Noel had in Tunisia ? This man and his horses, waiting below, must convey him to

Sir Tom's house in Sidi Bou Saïd. Yes, he was going there in spite of what had happened. He had contracted for the house. He must pay for it. He must go somewhere, had to be somewhere. As well be there as anywhere else. Nothing mattered much now. He was thoroughly sickened with life. But he had to go on in it.

He settled the bill with one of the lustrous ladies, who emerged from somewhere looking disastrous in a wrapper. His luggage was carried down by the Maltese and a barelegged Tunisian native with a broom and piled up in the carriage, as it had been on the night before : on the box, on the floor by Noel's feet, in the hood, and on the vacant seat by his side. There was only just room for it, but they got it all in, and then the Maltese came for his orders.

"Sidi Bou Saïd !" said Noel.

He had engaged no personal servant to replace Taha. He knew he must immediately get hold of one, or even of two, perhaps, to help in the house. But he couldn't worry about that in Tunis. He wanted now to get away from a city, to be quiet somewhere, to be secluded in a house that would be his own for a time. He could find some one, or some two, in Sidi Bou Saïd, village people, not townspeople. The natives might be simpler, more honest, in Sidi Bou Saïd than here in Tunis. He'd get someone. But now to be out of Tunis as quickly as possible. Why did the two lean horses with their jingling bells go so slowly ? They had probably not had enough to eat.

Suddenly he remembered that he hadn't had any breakfast, and he called to his coachman and told him to stop somewhere before they were out of the city.

*"Il me faut avoir un café au lait."*

*"Très bieng !"*

Almost immediately he pulled up his horses before a large restaurant at a corner of a wide street where many small tables were arranged on the pavement.

*"Café bon ici !"*

Noel got out, sat down at one of the tables, ordered, and was promptly served with, coffee, hot milk, a croissant, and butter. The meal quickly finished, he felt rather less vacant, got back into the carriage, and again said :

"Sidi Bou Saïd !"

The driver cracked his long whip and drove on.

They were now in the European quarter of Tunis. They passed the Résidence, outside of which stood two native sentinels staring across the road at the long avenue shaded by ficus trees.

*"La Résidence !"* said the Maltese driver, pointing with his whip.

*"Oui !"* said Noel.

A moment later, again pointing with his whip to a big modern church, the man observed proudly :

*"La Cathédrale."*

And again Noel said, *"Oui !"*

Tunis la Blanche held as yet no interest for him. He glanced at it with lacklustre eyes in the bright light of the morning.

They turned to the right and drove through suburbs that spread out to the public park of the Belvédère on the low hill that dominated the bitter

lakes. A long highroad on the left of the lakes stretched across the flat country which bordered the silent waters. Beyond them Noel saw the Djebel Zaghoun, a mountain with which his eyes were to become very familiar in his new life, standing out boldly under the cloudless blue, bathed in light which, strangely, made it look mysterious, like a mountain seen in a dream.

The waters of the lakes were pale blue in colour with opal tints in them here and there, streaks of grey, streaks of light green, dashes of pearl. He had heard talk of flamingoes that haunted the shores of the lakes and looked for them vaguely but saw none.

A thought came to him, 'Am I being punished for what I have done?' It stayed with him for a minute or two, then seemed to die away, as a wisp of smoke dies away in shimmering air.

The heat of the day was now strong though less than the heat of the desert, and presently he thought that the atmosphere became more vital and slightly cooler. They were heading towards the sea. But the morning was still. There was no breeze from the sea. Here and there, as if in the lakes, he saw houses. There must be tongues of land couchant in the midst of them, and on those tongues were houses. And farther away were more houses beyond the lakes. These had a mirage-like look, unsubstantial, romantic.

To show the country to Noel, and to gain some extra money, the driver took him through the park and then down again to the highroad. Everything seemed strangely detached and dreamlike to him because of his peculiar condition of body and mind. He knew that his state was not normal.

On the left of the road there was scrub; many bushes, some of them large; and there was sun-dried grass at their feet.

Now and then they passed natives, sometimes striding along, showing bare legs, sometimes riding on donkeys. Now and then a camel went by loaded with sacks.

So this was Tunisia, and he was going to live here alone, without any aim, any work, any friends, any company, any love, for six months. A grey eternity seemed to stretch out before him.

Presently he lost sight of the bitter lakes. The carriage passed the high wall of a garden, then a gateway, through which at the end of a straight broad path Noel caught a glimpse of something that looked to him like a pavilion or the roofed terrace in front of an unseen house. At the top of a flagstaff there drooped a flag; of what nation he could not discern. The Maltese turned on his box.

"*Maisong du Consul Anglais!*" he stated. "*Moosieur Anglais?*"

"*Oui!*" said Noel.

"Anglais all very nice," said the man in English.

And Noel heard the same apparently sneering sound in his voice that he had detected in the voice of Aziza when she once had said 'nice' to him.

A little farther on they came among white houses set in gardens and to the nucleus of what seemed a small town. Another flagstaff rose up with a flag drooping from it. And Noel saw soldiers in a uniform new to him, completed by a fez from which hung a long tassel.

"*La Marsa!*" said the coachman. "*Le Bey et famille tous ici.*"

Noel remembered what Madame de Pleunier had told him about La Marsa. The French Resident and his family spent the summers here. And one could bathe. And there was a lovely *plage* somewhere not far off to the left of the little town, or big village, where after bathing one could lie unseen, except by a few African fishermen, in the sun and enjoy a sun bath.

The coachman, as hired coachmen will, was not taking Noel straight to Sidi Bou Saïd. He was making small *détours* to exhibit the country. The stranger would not know that but would think all they saw was on the way. And a little more money would go into the coachman's pocket. He pointed out a garden and house on the left. As much of the house as was visible from the road looked large and important, the entrance and garden enticing. The scheme of colour, ivory and pale blue, was delicious in the bright morning. Another flagstaff showed and the tricolour.

*"Monsieur le Résident et famille ici en été !"*

Noel remembered that he had an introductory letter to Son Excellence from Madame de Pleunier in his luggage. He would never present it. He wanted to make acquaintance with no one. He had an instinct to avoid all humankind. But it had been friendly of Madame de Pleunier to give it to him. She must have left for Paris now with her friend, Madame de Varenne. Those two agreeable Frenchwomen ! How little they knew of him ! How unconscious they were of the blow the former had administered to him on that dreadful day when Aziza had departed from Touggourt, cheered on her way to the desert by the music of the dancing house and the twittering cries of the dancers ! How had he managed to act so well ? From where had he drawn the strength and the courage to be so deceptive ? After what had happened to him and what he had done on that day he would never again be surprised by the success of any human deception. He would never forget the stroke of unconscious irony Madame de Pleunier had brought off when she had innocently asked him whether he remembered the girl in the bright green shawl. Remembered her !

The sound of a noise like a harsh laugh behind him startled the Maltese coachman. He turned round on his box. But he only saw the Englishman in the midst of his luggage, leaning back and staring up at him with a grim face. These Englishmen were solemn indeed.

"Very soon Sidi Bou Saïd !" he said in French.

"Ah !" said the Englishman.

The Maltese cracked his whip on either side of his horses and drove on.

Not long afterwards he pointed out to Noel a village on a high hill overlooking the Gulf of Tunis, the lovely mountain of Bou Kornine at the end of it, and the great plain in which Carthage had once gloriously lived.

*"Voilà Sidi Bou Saïd !"* he said.

Noel ordered him to pull up his horses, stood up in the carriage, and gazed out over the great landscape that seemed sleeping under the African sun. In a long silence he gazed. Here Carthage had been. It had stretched up to that Arab village, where now he was going to live for a while in solitude, to Sidi Bou Saïd. A great city with over a million inhabitants, rival and enemy of Rome. His student's mind tried for a moment to go back in history. Dido wild with horrible purposes, the Punic Wars, the bellium inexplicable, Hannibal and a time of amazing prosperity after the nine years' war with Spain, the second war with Rome, the battle of Cannae, Hannibal's

defeat at Zama, peace, the warning, '*Delenda est Carthago*,' the third Punic War, and the destruction that came to the city. Here had been the seat of a thousand ambitions, of a lust after conquest almost inappeasable. And all had long ago come to an end. Now—nothing. An empty landscape scattered with stones that had no meaning for the native though still some for the archæologist.

A herd of goats, accompanied by a goatherd in a patched burnous, strayed in the foreground. In the distance on a hill Noel saw a large modern church that looked almost aggressively important.

"*Cathédrale du Saint Louis*," said the coachman.

A monument that recalled to Tunisians the memory of the great Cardinal Lavigérie, whose memory was also associated with the White Fathers of Africa.

Over this landscape, witness to the impermanence of all things mortal, Noel would look for six months in a ghastly solitude. His heart sank, though he tried to say to himself with conviction, 'What do I matter? How profoundly unimportant is all that happens to me! I am nothing, less than nothing, in the scheme of the world! I'm of absolutely no consequence. No one is of any real, lasting consequence. Who cares if I suffer and have lost all faith in everything? Nobody. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters, except for a few minutes, hours, days. Everything passes away, with hideous rapidity, even suffering. This was Carthage. Now it's a feeding ground for goats.'

"*Allez ! Allez !*"

He sank back in the carriage among the luggage. The Maltese drove on towards the white village up there on the hill, with its minaret thrust upwards to the flawless blue.

"My home!" Noel said to himself.

And again behind him the Maltese coachman heard the harsh laugh.

In the evening of that day Noel was 'settled in.' He had paid off the Maltese, had unpacked his luggage, put out his books, visited every room in Sir Tom's small but quite comfortable house, gone all over the garden, gazed at the view from it, interviewed Sir Tom's two servants, the gardener, a Tunisian, pale, plump, and polite, and his Sicilian wife, who occupied a small house, like a lodge, joined on to the main house but with a separate entrance and a dividing wall.

The wife was called Grazia and was a middle-aged, swarthy, small, wrinkled woman with bright, very tiny eyes. She was Sir Tom's cook and, Noel hoped, would now be his for as long as he was in Sidi Bou Saïd. A man, who the gardener felt sure would 'do' for the third house servant, would come that evening after Noel's dinner to be interviewed. He was established in Sidi Bou Saïd but was a native of Djerba, the fabled Isle of the Lotus-Eaters.

Already Noel felt a faint scholar's interest in the prospect of seeing this man, whose name was Bakouch. At half after eight he would be there.

On that first evening, as it was deliciously warm, Noel, who, in his present abnormal condition, feared an interior as one might fear a cage, decided to dine out of doors and had the dining-room table carried into the garden and a chair, painted pale blue, set before it.



The dinner was good. There was excellent macaroni prepared with Sicilian skill. But Noel had little appetite. With the vague idea of pleasing Grazia, however, he ate as much as he could and drank a glass of chianti provided for him by the gardener.

Towards nine o'clock Bakouch, the man from the Isle of the Lotus-Eaters, was announced.

He was young, perhaps near thirty, very large, pale, like the gardener, and looked, Noel thought, very lethargic but calm and good-humoured. He had curved eyebrows, like half-moons, guarding round dark eyes that were rather prominent. His features were the contrary of Semitic. They looked oddly small, as if nearly lost in a face with plump cheeks above which rose a jutting forehead, round like the eyes. Little nose, little mouth, little chin melting into a throat like a column. Rather fat hands, soft-looking, like a woman's. So this was a Lotus-Eater!

He wore wide trousers of white linen, spotlessly clean, a short yellow jacket, yellow slippers, grey socks, braces. His head was crowned with tarboosh having a long tassel. A gold chain hung over his jacket, evidently attached to a watch. When Noel addressed him he spoke French in a drowsy contralto voice.

There was something about him which pleased Noel mildly, and after a short talk, in which, of course, money was mentioned, he was engaged, though there was one thing against him. He said that he must sleep 'out,' as he had a wife and a child in the village. But he would be at the house punctually by half-past six every morning and stay on at night until after the patron's dinner.

After some hesitation Noel agreed to that. He would now sleep alone in Sir Tom's house. But what did it matter? Perhaps it would even be better for him, who had such a longing just now to be isolated. But how about the door key? He didn't want to have to come down every day to let Bakouch in at six-thirty.

The gardener said he had an extra key to the house door and would see to that. Very well! Bakouch was engaged and went off into the night looking very large and serene.

When he had gone and Grazia had cleared away dinner, and, with her husband's assistance, had carried the dinner table into the house, good nights were said, and loneliness descended upon Noel like snow on a landscape.

He was safe now from the ugly knowledge of servants and others, a knowledge that, thank God, by some miracle had never reached Madame de Pleunier. He was safe from pity and secret ridicule. That was all. It must suffice him. He must be thankful for that.

As yet he had only seen the village while driving through it in a condition of apathy. But even so he had received an impression that, succeeding to the many impressions of Touggourt, noisy, barbaric, touched with a wildness almost savage, was curiously, almost startlingly calm. A delicate atmosphere of distinction and even, it seemed, of respectability reigned within it, Noel thought. There was something almost fastidious, something almost refined, in its well-ordered whiteness.

Sir Tom's house was the last house at the extreme edge of the village beyond the road which led up to it from the plain. The road stopped by the garden gate. So much the better. The house stood on flat ground on

the summit of a cliff, which curved sharply at the left of the garden. The village and the house of the Varennes were away to the right.

The Varenne 'palace,' as some people called it, with its succession of terraces going down to the sea where the Bey's bathing house stood, lay below and in front of the village, separated from it by private grounds. Noel had not seen the house yet but only the entrance leading into the grounds, with its pent roof of glazed tiles and its great portals of yellow wood. When he had passed by these doors they had been open, and he had caught a glimpse of a drive bordered with aloes and cactus lending to the enchantments beyond. The palace must be shut up as the Varennes were spending the summer in France. Noel was thankful for that. Although he was inclined to like Madame de Varenne he would have hated to have neighbours near whom he knew. In his collapsed condition any social contacts would have been almost unbearable to him.

For now that he was at last entirely alone he realized that he was suffering from something akin to a nervous breakdown.

On arriving he had gone through Sir Tom's house with a complete lack of interest. It contained several rooms, all of them rather small. The largest was a narrow and long upstairs sitting-room, with round-topped windows fitted with lozenges of gaudily painted glass. There he would read and write, when he was fit to do either. On the same floor there was a small bedroom for him, and there were two other small rooms for guests. There was a bathroom with a floor of red tiles. This contained as well as a bath a douche. The narrow staircase had wooden balusters painted with the pale blue so prevalent in many parts of Tunisia. The lovely emerald-green tiles, also characteristic of Tunisia, which shine almost like jewels on the roofs of many white bungalows in the southern part of the country, were unfortunately not in evidence.

The house was rather dark and not very well planned. But it had a decent dining-room on the ground floor and was comfortably, though not interestingly furnished. It was not a sad little house but only a dull little house, with an attractive and nicely kept garden in a very fine situation. And it was sturdily built to withstand the wintry winters that sometimes visit the promontory of the Cap de Carthage. It would 'do' very well for Noel. In fact, it seemed to him almost luxurious after his tent life in Touggourt. He felt that he would be able to endure living in it. But that was all. Not the fault of Sir Tom; the fault of one man's destiny.

When Bakouch left him and the gardener and his wife had disappeared to their lodge joined on to the house, Noel remained in the garden, sitting in a *chaise longue*, and listened for the sound of the sea at the foot of the cliff.

But he heard nothing, for the night was still and the sea almost at rest. It greeted him with no voice. Nothing disturbed him except that which he carried within himself. Now, in his solitude, with behind him the empty house, in which he would presently be shut up alone, the curious apathy which had clothed him like a garment deserted him and was replaced by an inner activity which quickly became intense. His conviction of being totally isolated and not subject to any chance of intrusion seemed to release this activity suddenly, as if it were given freedom by the touch of a spring. He faced the immediate future not vaguely but with clear sight and was acutely aware of what he had lately endured. What had happened to him

seemed to come upon him in the night like a spectre. He was back in the sands of Touggourt. Madame de Pleunier and Madame de Varenne, in their transparent veils and white dresses, were with him. He heard Madame de Pleunier speaking. He heard the twittering farewell of the Ouled Nails. He saw two white camels sauntering away into the vastness of the Sahara, led by a horseman. The shriek of the African hautboy, the thunder of the tom-toms, was in his ears.

How had he managed to keep from the knowledge of those two experienced Frenchwomen the tumult of emotion that had possessed him? The effort he had made had been immense and immediate, but he did not remember much about it. Just for an instant he had moved on with the others to see the departure. And he had stood still in the crowd and had seen it and had, he supposed, looked just as usual. He didn't know. He hadn't been able to look at himself. But no one near him had shown any surprise connected with him. It was extraordinary that an ordinary man had such power to deceive. He had it, that power. He knew that now. He had never suspected that he had it. Quietly, managing somehow to keep up a conversation, he had accompanied the two Frenchwomen back to the Commandant's house and had bidden them a smiling farewell. Yes, he had smiled. He remembered smiling. Madame de Pleunier had kindly asked him to call once more before he left Touggourt to bid them *au revoir*, and he had said he would come. And an hour had been fixed for the following day. Going to the Commandant's house, he had seen Taha in the market-place, and Taha's eyes fixed intently upon him had been full of knowledge. He knew what had happened and was eagerly interested. And a little farther on they had come upon Hassan returning from the fête. Hassan had saluted them and had hastened on before them to open the door. And when they had reached it and stood for a moment saying good-bye and the little nothings that go with that, Hassan's fiercely bright and abominably comprehending eyes had seemed, to Noel, to scramble through all his being, searching out and rummaging in every corner of it.

At last the two women had gone into the house, and Hassan, with a last exquisitely penetrating glance, had shut the door, and Noel had been free to act. And immediately he had felt a hot rage go all through him and a desire to do something violent. And he had gone at once to Sabatier's rooms. Sabatier had been out, but Larbi had said he would be in not later than noon. And a few minutes after noon he had come in from the barracks. He did not know what had happened. In a few words Noel had told him.

"Aziza has gone away this morning to be married. Madame de Pleunier knew it was she and told me. We had gone to see the marriage departure of an Ouled Nail dancer. She told me only when I was there and the decorated camel with the palanquin on it was starting. Will you come with me to the Maréchale? Please come!"

Sabatier had shown for a moment extreme astonishment.

"Aziza—gone away to be married!"

"Yes. To the Bedouin! My money has been her dowry!"

Noel remembered how he had said that, with what intense bitterness, and he remembered something else: how the look of astonishment had died away from Sabatier's face.

"These people! These desert people!"

That was all he had said for a moment. Then he had added :

"After all my years in Africa they have actually been able to surprise me by their cunning! Even me! *You!* It's understandable. But that I——!"

And a look of cold anger had altered his face.

"Yes. I will come with you to the Maréchale. I don't think it will do any good. Still one can curse her!"

He had made a movement as if to go out with Noel, then had stopped.

"One minute! Wait a minute!"

"What is it?"

"You said Madame de Pleunier told you."

"She did."

"How did she know?"

"She said that Hassan—that houseboy of hers—had told her."

"Hassan!"

"Yes."

"Did she let you know whether she knew you had had to do with Aziza?"

"Oh, no! She doesn't know. She doesn't suspect anything."

"Ah?"

"She simply told me as a piece of news that would be quite indifferent to me. She even, when she was telling me, asked me if I *remembered* the dancing girl in the bright green shawl! *Remembered* her!"

"Ah!"

"And I didn't show anything. She hasn't the least suspicion of what I was feeling. I managed somehow to seem quite ordinary. I don't know how. I *had* to! That was it! Just *had* to! But now, for God's sake, come with me to the Maréchale, Sabatier!"

"I will come, of course!"

And they had set out at once.

Noel would never forget that walk in the sand under the burning noon-day sun, his heart burning within—with rage. They had walked all the way in silence. Sabatier had looked intensely preoccupied. Even in his contained rage Noel had noticed that—Sabatier's intense preoccupation—had even wondered about it, for a moment escaping from self-concentration. And they had come to the doorway of the women's quarter, had passed in, and gone at once to the Maréchale's room. The big door of it had been shut. Sabatier had tried it and found it locked. He had struck on it with his fist. There was no reply. Then he had lifted a foot and kicked the door. Some women had shown themselves, peeping to see what the noise was about. And then the hateful eunuch had appeared, shambling across the courtyard, and, lifting up his high peevish voice and addressing Sabatier in Arabic, had spoken to him words which Noel only partly understood. Sabatier had replied. A short colloquy had taken place between them, and Sabatier had turned to Noel.

"But he says—you saw the departure you told me!"

"Yes, of course!"

"Weren't there two camels?"

"Two!" Noel had exclaimed. "Yes, there were two."

A sudden dreadful understanding had come to him.

"The Maréchale——"

"Was on the second camel. Aziza is her daughter. Roulé ! Roulé ! Nothing more to be done. Mother love—shall we call it ?"

He let out a little laugh, a trickle of bitterness, sour with self-contempt.

They had stood for a moment before the shut door, watched by the women. The eunuch stood with them, showing his long yellow teeth in a grin. Sabatier had noticed that grin and, to Noel's extreme surprise, had done what Noel was longing to do. He had given the eunuch a hard smack in the face as they left the courtyard pursued by the laughter and shrieks of the women.

And that had been the end of it. Aziza was gone. The Maréchale was gone. Noel's money was gone. There was nothing to be done. At that moment Noel had not cared about the loss of his money. What had amazed him and enraged him still when he thought of it was the knowledge that he had paid down the money which would go to the Bedouin, the horse-man who had led the procession into the desert.

He understood now the means the Maréchale had used to stop the Bedouin's assault on Aziza's door in the night. The Bedouin had been told what the Roumi within the chamber had done. And his fury had been appeased.

So that was desert love ! Incomprehensible ! Completely incomprehensible ! Impossible to have any real understanding of these people. Noel knew now that he had never had any understanding of Aziza. And yet very often she had seemed simple, with the simplicity almost of an animal, remote from humanity in its supreme lack of self-consciousness. A man's judgment of others, reasoning from himself, was hopelessly at fault when the man was a European and those others were desert Africans.

It might be supposed that the shock Noel had undergone would have cured him suddenly and completely of his physical passion for Aziza, which he thought of as more than that. But it was not so. He felt rage. He felt disgust. And he felt a sort of bewilderment arising from incomprehension. How *could* people be like that ? But he missed her painfully. And her going suddenly out of his life, of course for ever, for this marriage would keep her permanently away from the Quartier des Femmes at Touggourt and the dancing and prostitute's life, left him obsessed by a dreadful sensation of blankness and an almost total indifference to everything. He knew now that it was ridiculous to suppose that Aziza and he had ever been companions or even could have become companions if their connection had lasted and she had spent the summer in Tunis. The hopes he had cherished, the intentions he had formed, the beliefs he had entertained about the future, had been entirely absurd. In fact, he had made a fool of himself. He knew it and told himself so. But now that the lethargy which had succeeded to his rage had gone from him he missed Aziza abominably. That was humiliating. He almost hated himself for still thinking about her, still wishing to be with her, but it seemed as if somehow she had got into his blood.

For the first time in his life Noel was actually frightened of the power the animal has in man, a power he was conscious of in himself. Aziza had waked up his animal, and the animal had taken charge.

He had that horrible conviction and was persecuted by it.

For what else but that, his animal, could have attached itself to Aziza ? The student in him, to whom he had given so many years of his early life,

burning the midnight oil, avoiding most of the natural pleasures of youth, not even caring for them—so intent had he been on cultivating his mind—and pushing on into greater and greater knowledge his intellect, had had nothing to do with her. She had not the beginning of even the faintest understanding of that student and never could have even if she lived out her whole life by his side instead of by the side of the Bedouin. And as to the clergyman in him—but he would not, even in thought, dwell upon him. As he had hidden the clerical clothes away in his luggage and had concealed the fact that he was a clergyman from everyone except Sabatier, so he had tried to hide the existence of the clergyman in him from himself. Yes, actually he had done that, and almost successfully. It seemed to him now in the night, looking back, that he had often forgotten that he was a clergyman, though there had been moments when he had remembered it. That time when he had been shut up with Father Anastase in his house in the alley! He had remembered it then. And there had been other moments. But often he had forgotten, or had seemed, even to himself, to forget. It was almost as if North Africa and the power of the desert had swept him clean away from his hold on accepted religion, though very often he had been conscious of the mystical appeal of the desert.

Well, now he had left it, and the power it had was a memory. And he had to take up somehow another sort of life for a time. How was he to get through it?

He had gone to the Commandant's house to say *au revoir*, as he had promised Madame de Pleunier he would, and had sat for a while with her and with Madame de Varenne. Before going he had made up his mind to seem perfectly natural and at ease with them. In the tent, before going, he had instructed himself. This effort would be the last before he quitted Touggourt. He must carry it through somehow successfully. He hoped and was inclined to believe that he had done this. Neither of the two women had seemed to notice anything unusual in him, anything to awaken surprise or suspicion. They had been cordial and lively: Madame de Pleunier in her light and sometimes not unpleasant satirical way, Madame de Varenne in her different manner of energetic gravity. Noel had felt that Madame de Varenne had developed a definite sympathy for him, which he felt he could return if they ever got to know each other better. But that was unlikely. He would probably be gone from Sidi Bou Saïd before she came back there for the winter. Where would he go when his time in this house, empty behind him, waiting to receive its solitary inmate, was up? He didn't believe he could go back to Touggourt ever, that place of trickery, of supreme deceit, and of what everyone would call, no doubt, if they knew of it, his supreme folly. Madame de Pleunier had held his hand for an instant that had seemed long when she had said *au revoir*. But probably he would never see her again. Perhaps he would spend the next winter in Bou Saada. He would have a friend there, Bernard. Just before he left the Commandant had come in to see the last of him and had asked him whether he would be back there next winter. Before he could reply Madame de Pleunier had said, lightly but decisively:

"Of course he is coming back. He will be faithful to Touggourt."

She had turned to him and had added:

"Won't you, Mr. Herriot?"

And he had called up a smile and had answered:

"Why not? Touggourt has done me a lot of good."

He had felt almost fiercely ironical as he had said that. Yet there had been truth in it. His health had greatly improved during the winter and the coming of spring. Even the shock he had undergone had only injured his body, if it had, through his mind. His apathy had seemed to him to be physical as well as mental, yet now in the night it had suddenly left him and given place to this intense activity.

He had gone away from the Commandant's house without seeing again the boy Hassan and had been glad of that.

His other farewell visit had been paid to Sabatier, who had asked him to dine and sleep on his last night in the belly of the desert. It was best to sleep in the city as the diligence for M'raier started long before daybreak, and Noel must get to bed early.

He had agreed and had left the camp, in which he had spent so many days and nights, before sunset, after paying Amar and bidding him good-bye. Taha would accompany him in the diligence as far as Biskra and would have all his belongings conveyed to the starting-place of the diligence.

The dinner with Sabatier had not produced much talk. Noel, perhaps naturally, had been preoccupied, dulled by events and by the sombre anticipation of the two days' journey—fifteen hours each day—through the desert to Biskra in the disagreeable company of the servant he meant to get rid of. Sabatier had been very kind and friendly to him, had shown real liking for him and a quiet sympathy in his trouble. He had been hospitable and sincere, had received Noel's confidence—the fact that he was a clergyman—without surprise or contempt or the least hint of condemnation and had certainly never repeated it to anyone. Noel would always feel gratitude to Sabatier and genuine friendship for him. But on that last evening he could not compel spirits to come at his call during dinner, and he knew that he was dull company.

Sabatier had not seemed to notice that and had talked quietly and apparently without much interest of ordinary things. But he, too, had seemed preoccupied, not specially conscious of Noel—who was glad of that—but dwelling, perhaps, upon inner things that concerned himself. Noel had not known. Such conversation as there had been had only just touched the surface, had meant very little.

But when dinner had been finished and they had gone to smoke in the shadowy room of the carpets, Sabatier had suddenly seemed to come to a decision. Probably he had been considering whether to say something, to come out with something, or to keep silence, and had at last made up his mind to speak. When Larbi had brought coffee and left them for the night Sabatier had said :

"What has happened to you, my friend, seems a tragedy. It must. But since it has happened I have been wondering whether, if you had had your way and all had gone as you planned, the tragedy might not have been greater."

Noel had said nothing, though his whole being seemed to him to have risen in hot opposition to this. And Sabatier had developed his theory of what the greater tragedy might have been.

He had dwelt especially on the perhaps insurmountable barrier that lies between the Occidental and the Oriental spirit. So he had spoken of it as spirit, '*esprit*.' After his many years spent in the desert regions of North

Africa he had come to the conclusion that the European never really understands the African, or the African the European. The European, he had said, can be, and often is, fascinated, or at any rate greatly attracted by, the African, but the contrary fascination, or great attraction, in his experience did not take place. At any rate, not in North Africa. He spoke only of that.

"You fell desperately in love with this girl. You have—forgive me for speaking so frankly—a great deal of *European* attraction. You don't realize it at all. I have noticed that. But it is felt by *Europeans*. Yet this girl, this Aziza, did not feel it at all. That seems evident from what she has done. I don't know, of course, how she *seemed* to be when you were shut up together in her chamber. I judge by the facts. It's easy enough for a European man to fall in love with a North African girl. It has happened several times in my own experience."

He had not said that he himself had experienced that, but something in his vivid blue eyes had made Noel suspect it.

"I have never known the contrary to happen. I have never known a North African girl to fall in love with a European man. You may say, 'But they mostly go veiled.' That is true, and so most of the women are ruled out. Only the nomad women and the dancers, the Ouled Nail women, remain. The latter, prostitutes, as we know.

"And it is one of them you have cared for. I believe, *mon ami*, that your life with her in Tunisia would quickly have become impossible. I believe what you wanted to undertake would have proved a fiasco. In my opinion it could not have turned out a success. I always thought that. But it was not my business to say so. You would not have listened, would not have believed. It is always useless to argue against a love with a man who is in love. You have had a vile shock. It may take you a long time to recover from it. But I must think that had you had your way you would, in the end, have had a very miserable experience. Forgive me! Being your friend, I have unburdened my heart."

Noel had listened without anger, but also without relief. What Sabatier, speaking out of a long experience, said seemed reasonable, but Noel was not in a condition to accept it as inevitably true. To all rules there are surely exceptions. He would have been able to tame Aziza to his lure. He would, with time, have made her understand him and have learned to understand her. But he had not said that to Sabatier. He had only said:

"Perhaps you are right. You know the people far better than I do. Perhaps you are right."

"But you don't think so!" Sabatier had said with his faintly ironical but not unkind smile.

And then he had left that, and almost immediately, Noel remembered, the conversation had turned upon Madame de Pleunier.

Noel had never understood what Sabatier's relations with Madame de Pleunier exactly were, or had been. They were certainly what is usually called 'intimate.' That was all he knew. He did not know how much, or how little, they liked one another. And when he thought of their relations as 'intimate' he did not think of that intimacy as physical. About that he knew nothing and was not one of the dirty-minded who are perpetually thinking of physical things. He simply felt certain that they knew each other very well and that there was an understanding of some kind



between them and that he did not know the precise nature of that understanding.

In his conversation about Madame de Pleunier on the last night of his stay in Touggourt one or two things struck him and had remained in his mind. He had told Sabatier of his farewell visit to the two Frenchwomen and of having been attracted by Madame de Varenne. Sabatier had met her and knew her slightly and had said that he felt sure that she was an interesting woman, but one who wanted 'knowing,' and, on that, Noel had asked him if he did not think that everyone wanted 'knowing.' He had agreed but had commented, "But some much more than others." Noel had been moved to ask him whether he classed Madame de Pleunier among those others. And he had said, "Certainly not!" After a moment he had added, "And you?" And then Noel had said that he had always felt, and felt still, that, for him, there was a good deal of the enigma in Madame de Pleunier and that now he would never have an opportunity of solving that enigma. Sabatier had asked him, "Why not?" And then Noel had said that though, from politeness, when bidding adieu to Madame de Pleunier, he had uttered the usual *au revoir*, he had no reason to think that he would ever see her again.

When he had made that statement a strange expression had altered Sabatier's face for a moment. It had been, Noel thought, an expression of blank incredulity, succeeded, however, almost instantly by a look of compassion. Then he had said:

"You have made up your mind, I suppose, not to be here next winter?"

"Yes."

"That is understandable. But where do you think of going?"

"Perhaps to Bou Saada."

They had then talked for a few minutes about Bou Saada, which, of course, Sabatier knew. And not very long afterwards had parted for the night. When saying good night, Noel, realizing painfully the dreary solitude that lay before him, like a waiting enemy, had said that he hoped very much Sabatier would manage to come to Tunisia during the summer, perhaps in August, the time of the very great heat, and would be his guest in the house of Sir Tom. Sabatier had thanked him cordially but just before leaving him for the night had stopped in the doorway, turned round, and said:

"But perhaps when that time comes you may not want my company."

Before Noel had had time to express his surprise at this unexpected remark or to make any protest Sabatier had gone away to his room and Larbi had appeared to make up the bed for Noel on the divan.

In the starry darkness of the early morning and the slight chill before sunrise Noel had taken the diligence and bade good-bye to Touggourt. Sabatier had got up to see the last of him. In parting from him Noel had felt that he was leaving his only true friend in North Africa, the only human being who, perhaps, thoroughly understood a good part of him, though of course not all. As they grasped hands Noel had said:

"Why did you say I might not want you in Sidi Bou Saïd when the summer came?"

"Did I say it?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you will understand why later on—perhaps not."

Then the diligence, with its three horses abreast, had started on its long journey over the sands and the stony flats of the Sahara.

That look of blank incredulity followed by compassion, that strange comment of Sabatier's on Noel's warm invitation, had remained in Noel's mind. He pondered over them now as he sat alone in the garden of Sir Tom's house under the stars. What had they meant? What had prompted them?

He knocked out his pipe and got up from the basketwork armchair, stood for a moment, again listening for the sound of the sea, then walked slowly to the empty house, and locked himself in for his first lonely night in Sidi Bou Saïd.

Where was Aziza now? In what desert place? What was she doing? And the Bedouin?

There were damnable moments in a man's life.

Just over four weeks later, at the beginning of June, Noel was surprised to receive a letter from Madame de Pleunier, addressed from the Avenue Henri Martin in Paris. It was quite unexpected by him, as they had parted without apparently any intention of continuing their acquaintance by writing to each other. The letter arrived just before noon on a blazing hot day. Already he had come to consider that winter acquaintance as a thing of the past with no prospect of renewal, and when he saw the firm writing on the pale blue envelope decorated with a coronet and the letter *A* in purple and realized whom the letter was from, he was aware of a faint feeling of apprehension, which led him to keep it for a moment in his hand before opening it. Through these empty and solitary weeks he had been putting up a fight against desolation and trying in vain to forget Touggourt and his life there. He had absolutely made up his mind never to return to it. The place would be intolerable to him now. He hated the thought of it, but he thought of it continually.

Why should Madame de Pleunier write to him? He had not written to her. They had surely done with each other. Perhaps this was another note of introduction to someone in the neighbourhood. He had not presented her letter to the Resident General at La Marsa. In fact, he had long ago destroyed it. Although his life was horribly empty, unutterably so, the last thing he wished was to fill it up with the dust and ashes of social contacts. But the letter must be opened, and at last he tore the envelope.

*Avenue Henri Martin,*  
[and the date]

DEAR MR. HERRIOT,

*I have been very busy with Paris since Marguerite de Varenne and I arrived here, but though you have probably forgotten us and Touggourt, too, I have had you in mind now and then with a nasty little feeling of responsibility. It is through me that you have gone to Sidi Bou Saïd, and I have said to myself more than once, What does he think of it? Does he like it? Does he hate Sir Tom's house? Does he say to himself that I 'jockeyed' him into taking it and mutter, "Damn the woman! Why couldn't she have let me alone to find a summer place for myself?" Marguerite and I genuinely love Sidi Bou Saïd, and you know how stupidly inclined one often is to think that one's tastes are shared by one's friends and how seldom they are. Send me a few lines to set*

*my mind at rest if you can and tell me whether my few recommendations were of any use to you and whether you have made the acquaintance of His Excellency at La Marsa and, if so, whether he and his wife—a quite charming woman—have been nice to you. I don't send you any more introductions because I noticed that you weren't very keen about having them. You see how discreet I can be and how observant I am! I shall be here till the season ends. My husband joins me then, and I think we shall go to Deauville for a breath of sea air in the midst of another crowd. After the long exile in Touggourt I am hopelessly mondaine here. You will despise me for that, but we can't all be as philosophic as you seem to be. After Deauville some country-house life, some sport, and some riding. Why did you and I never ride together, by the way? I thought of it more than once but had a sort of vague idea that you didn't want to be bothered much with women of the desert. Was I right? Marguerite, whom I often see, would send her meilleurs souvenirs if she knew I was writing, and now I add mine.*

*Yours, sincerely,*

ADÈLE DE PLEUNIER.

As Noel read quickly this letter for the first time he wondered why he had felt faintly apprehensive before opening it. Why should there have been anything in it that might possibly be unpleasant to him? What could have led him to feel that there might be? It was just such a letter as a well-meaning acquaintance might write to a young man in whom she had taken a kindly but not a deep interest. There was certainly nothing in it to cause apprehension. And he felt relieved. Though what had he dreaded? He didn't know.

And then he read the letter again, more slowly and carefully, and began to feel slightly different about it. Wasn't there a note of irony in it? Veiled, very light, of course—Madame de Pleunier was French and did not often underline things—very light, but there? 'We can't all be as philosophic as you *seem* to be.' That '*seem*'! And about the riding. 'I thought of it more than once but had a sort of vague idea that you didn't want to be bothered much with women in the desert. Was I right?' Wasn't there a light irony again there? And he read back to the passage about his possibly thinking that Madame de Pleunier had 'jockeyed' him into taking Sir Tom's house and asking himself, 'Why couldn't she have let me alone to find a summer place for myself?' So that possibility had occurred to her. And hadn't he once or twice, in Touggourt, wondered a little why she had been anxious that he should spend the summer just at Sidi Bou Saïd and fancied she was putting pressure on him to go there. Certainly he had eventually put that down to a friendly wish, on her part, to do her friend, Sir Tom, a good turn. But—yes, he had wondered a little, and evidently she had been aware of that. And this passage in her letter was a reference to that. And he began to wonder again. And vaguely he began again to feel a very faint sense of apprehension. She was very observant. Being an accomplished woman of the world, she was also discreet. At times! But when a deep-rooted feeling of injury got hold of her? Her shown hatred of the Ouled Nail women! Hadn't that once or twice got the better of her discretion? 'A philosopher, as you *seem* to be.' She must have seen through his attempt at being philosophic and was even indicating to him now that she had seen through it. 'A sort of vague idea that you didn't want to be bothered much

with women in the desert.' Madame de Pleunier might be many things, but 'vague' she emphatically was not, in spite of the apparently vague look he had sometimes noticed.

That reference to 'women in the desert'!

Noel found himself brooding over it and presently—with reluctance, it seemed to him, but irresistibly forced to—putting to himself the question, 'Did Madame de Pleunier get to know about Aziza and me? Does she know? And is that passage in her letter really full of a bitter irony which feeling drove her to put into writing?'

And the faint apprehension he had felt on seeing the firm handwriting on the blue envelope returned to him and increased till it was no longer faint.

But then he said to himself that no, she couldn't have known, or she would never have asked him to come with her and Madame de Varenne to see Aziza's departure into the desert. Of course she couldn't have known and didn't know now. Unless, possibly, she had learned about his liaison after his departure from Touggourt. That, of course, was possible. Hassan, the boy, might have spoken. Or Father Anastase might have spoken. A rumour might have reached her, if not a statement. He remembered how, when in Touggourt, he had almost wondered at her 'blessed ignorance,' as he had thought it, and how relieved he had been when he had felt quite positive that she knew nothing. When he had been in Touggourt she could not have known; certainly she did not know. But she might have learned about him and Aziza since then.

But if she had learned could she have written this friendly, even this cordial letter? Wouldn't she have taken a violent dislike to him? Wouldn't she have 'dropped' him, shut him out from her remembrance, from her life entirely? She would have despised him, felt contempt for him. He remembered that broken sentence of hers, said to him in the crowd, when the troop of gaudily dressed Ouled Nails had streamed out into the glaring daylight.

'Aren't they simply terrible in the sunshine?'

She had said that. And she had added, 'How *can* anyone——' and had broken off abruptly.

He had heard what she said, though he had seemed not to, because he had been searching among the Ouled Nails for a girl in a bright green shawl. And then she had laid a hand on his arm to oblige him to listen to her and had repeated:

'Aren't they terrible in the sunshine?'

If she knew she wouldn't have written that letter. She would have 'dropped' him, put him away out of her life as one of those contemptible and unworthy Europeans who fell in love with the desert danciers. So she didn't know. He need not be afraid of that. It was morbid of him to be apprehensive. But he knew he was in a morbid condition. His long solitude, the emptiness of his life, tended to make him morbid. And—he hadn't 'got over' what had happened to him in Touggourt.

He folded the letter up and thrust it into his pocket. He must answer it, of course, and he decided he would do that in the evening of that day, after his bathe at the lonely *plage* away to the left of La Marsa. He often went there in the afternoon. It was something to do. And he liked the loneliness there. (For feeling lonely he sought loneliness.) He hired a

carriage from La Marsa to fetch him, made it wait for him in La Marsa, walked from there to the *plage*, and after his bathe returned on foot to La Marsa, and drove home to Sidi Bou Saïd. He always had the same coachman and had come to a reasonable arrangement with him about payment. The days when he bathed at the *plage* were fixed. He went there on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. Madame de Pleunier's letter had reached him on a Friday. The carriage would come for him soon after four, when the heat of the day began to diminish. He did not read the letter again or take it out of his pocket until he arrived on foot at the *plage* and was about to undress in the sand. Then, as he pulled off his jacket and was laying it down and folding it, he felt the thin letter paper and decided to read the letter once more when he was resting after his swim. After his bathe was over he would decide what sort of answer to make to it.

There was no one that day on the *plage*. Not even an African fisherman was visible casting his net into the almost unruffled water. La Marsa was hidden from him by the turn of the coast. He had all the solitude that the morbid part of him desired.

The sea water was warm. He stayed in it a long time, swimming languidly, now and then gazing up at the cloudless blue sky as he floated, a lone Roumi in the African sea. At last he came out, having suffered a sea change, and lay down on the sand and thought over the letter and what his answer should be.

He didn't answer it that night. But on the following morning he wrote this reply.

Sidi Bou Saïd,  
[and the date]

DEAR MADAME DE PLEUNIER,

Many thanks for your kind letter which I received yesterday. It was very good of you to write to me when you are so taken up with the pleasures of Paris, very good of you to remember my humble little life all alone in Sidi Bou Saïd. You write that I am, or any rate I seem to be, philosophic. I don't know whether I am or not. But I do know that I found Sidi Bou Saïd as unusual and beautiful as you said it was and that I am getting along very well here. All goes smoothly in the house which suits me excellently. Your recommendations were useful—very. I have found a servant here in the village who does very well and is honest. He comes from the Island of Djerba. The days go by quickly. I am studying Arabic and getting on pretty fast. I followed your advice and visited the *plage* beyond La Marsa, and now I bathe there four times a week, and always with enjoyment. The climate up here is fine in spite of the heat, which I bear without inconvenience. My health is good; North Africa has proved the best possible doctor for me. So what have I to complain of? Nothing. You ask me whether I have presented my letter of introduction to the Resident General. Well—no! I must confess that I haven't yet. I'm afraid that socially I am incurably lazy. But you must remember that I have no pretensions to be an *homme du monde* and have always been accustomed to a quiet life such as would be unendurable by you. It seemed to me that His Excellency and Madame could only be bored by the society of an undistinguished Englishman with whom they could have very little in common. You put up with me in the desert. But this is Tunisia. And such a high official as His Excellency must have his time very much filled up. Of course I have often looked down on

*the lovely house of your friend, Madame de Varenne, and I have seen the white peacocks sunning themselves on the great terrace in front of it. I mean to stay out my six months here. I could not be in a better place. So please set your mind at ease about me. My best regards to you and Madame de Varenne. And please give them, too, to your husband and thank him for his kindness and hospitality to me in Touggourt.*

*Yours sincerely,*

NOEL HERRIOT.

A surely reasonable and entirely non-committal letter, a letter that revealed nothing of the essential aridity and fundamental dreariness of his life, a letter sufficiently cordial but in no wise 'gushing,' a polite letter simply expressing a certain amount of truth though it concealed most of the truth that really mattered. Noel wrote it slowly and with care, read it over when he had finished it, and considered it dull. Yes, it was dull, but it seemed, in the writing, to have dispersed a cloud in his mind. He had come to a definite conviction that Madame de Pleunier had not 'done' with him, that she had a purpose connected with him. What that purpose could be he did not know. But he said to himself :

'She means to come into my life again somehow, but she does not intend me to know it.'

He folded up his letter, put it into an envelope, addressed it, and told Bakouch to take it at once to the post.

Madame de Pleunier did not reply to his letter. There was no reason why she should as he had written in answer to hers. But as the days went by and no letter came Noel realized that he had expected another letter and was surprised by its non-arrival.

Perhaps she had forgotten him. If so he had been wrong in his conviction about her.

He was living all this time a life of complete isolation. The people in the white village, so unusually clean and delicately charming compared with most North African villages of that time, of course all knew him by sight and had found out as much as they could about him. Not very much, as he had not brought Taha with him. They were friendly and seemed simple people. They smiled at and saluted him as he went by on his walks. He replied to their greetings and sometimes spoke to them when he had a reason for speech, when, for instance, he was buying some fruit or selecting some vegetables for one of his meals. He worked at his Arabic and was now able to carry on a simple conversation in that language when he visited the souks of Tunis, having gone thither by train.

To fill up his empty hours he explored the native quarters, mounted to the roof of the Bey's ancient palace from which he could see spread out below and around him the whole of the blanched and murmuring city, wandered through the silent chambers and courts of the Bardo, strolled in the sunshine over the site that once had been Carthage.

Now and then he had driven to the public park of the Belvédère, on the low hill commanding a wide view of the plain of Carthage, the bitter lakes, Hammam Lif, the impressive mountain of Zaghouan, and of Tunis in the distance. He went there towards the hour of sunset, strolled among the great trees and flowering bushes, mounted to the lovely little pavilion of

the Manouba, and, seated on a bench of marble, looked out through an archway, between the delicate pillars, at the great view being slowly gathered into the tender arms of the summer evening. He knew that it was beautiful. He knew that it was strange, very strange, and unusual to European eyes. He even knew that there was magic in it, the magic that is born out of the incomparable light that decorates with its radiance and its dreamlike mystery the landscapes of Northern Africa, the lakes, the plains, the mountains, and the spaces of the desert. He knew this, but he only felt it and realized it with melancholy, sometimes even with a sort of sick despair and a sensation of self-disgust that was almost intolerable. He hated what had been done to him. He hated his own folly, the betrayal it had earned for him, the contempt and secret ridicule that must have attended every manifestation of his eager devotion to Aziza, of his formal courtesy to the Maréchale, the contempt those two women, the one old in ugly experience, the other young in premature knowledge of vice, must have felt towards him as they saw his crazy passion increase night by night and lured him on to the fulfilment of their design. He still, even now, grew hot when he thought of it all and saw in imagination the eunuch's hyena-like grin and in imagination heard the Bedouin's assault on Aziza's door in the night: the assault of the man he had never actually seen, except as a hooded figure from whose body a strange heat had come out to his body, and once more as the distant horseman, the man for whose lustful satisfaction he had paid down the price, the man whom he felt he knew with a sort of horrible intimacy. That man he hated. But most of all he hated himself for his inability to rid himself of his obsession for the girl he had never known but who had known him with such dreadful accuracy, the accuracy of her abominable profession to which he had succumbed. What a début in love had been his! It was insufferable to think back to it. But it was more insufferable to be still tormented by desire to have the partner in it, the human creature who had monstrously succeeded in bringing it into being, with him here, only his, in Tunisia. How could he want her? How could he miss her! But he did want her and did miss her. In some mysterious fashion she had got into his blood. Often he told himself that he loathed her, but he longed for her to be in Tunis and felt his life empty without her. He had anticipated so much for this summer—and now there was nothing, and he could enjoy nothing. And he had nothing to look forward to. His body had been disturbed, and he suffered acutely from that, much more than he had supposed a man could suffer from the body when he was in health. And his mind had a green sickness which nothing could overcome. He worked at his Arabic because he had to do something and was by nature a student, or had been in days gone by before the strong light of Africa had shone on him. He glanced at his shelf of carefully selected books. Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, Horace, Macaulay, Shakespeare. And then he went to another shelf of books in yellow paper covers. To get on with his French he was taking a course of French novels. Many of them were well written. Nearly all of them dealt with the physical passions of women and men, with subtle intrigues, with fruition, with the ennui of satiety or the despair of abandonment. And he took down a book from that shelf, dropped into one of the leather arm-chairs, smoked, and sometimes read until late in the night. And often he said to himself as he put the book down before going to bed:

'What I have been through would have done for a subject—and what I am going through now.'

During this period of loneliness he was often acutely self-conscious. He looked at himself mentally; he examined himself; he wondered at himself, stood aghast before his own mystery and tried to condemn himself, the clerical part of him feeling it ought to function. But in that last effort it seemed to him that he failed, that the desert influence remained with him and was altogether too strong for him. All the desert men, he believed, were as he had been, and even those who, not desert men born, dwelt in the desert. Nothing he had done had shocked or even had surprised either Bernard or Sabatier. As to the Commandant, for a long time Noel had suspected that Madame de Pleunier's hatred of the Ouled Naïl women must be partly connected with something her husband had done in the past. He even thought it possible that she spent so much of her time in what she considered exile in order to keep a watch on her husband. She might say that it was her duty to be there and to entertain for him and show up in the Commandant's house, but Noel doubted her being naturally a dutiful woman.

In the desert, then, far away from what was called 'civilization,' men were 'like that.' They were not 'like that' in Upper Green so far as Noel had been able to observe them. There they had mostly led conventional lives. No doubt even the desert had its conventions, but they were not shackles. In Upper Green Noel felt he had been a quite different man from the man he was now. He could not go back to that man, and he could not wholly condemn the new man. For he was as other men were in this African land. That was what he felt. His English sense of religion seemed to have slid out of him, almost without his being conscious of its surreptitious departure.

And it had been replaced by a sort of much greater world-consciousness than he had had before he crossed over the sea. He had a wider mind. His boundaries were enlarged. He saw men in a different way and with men himself. Nature had overpowered the Protestant clergyman in him. That seemed to be the truth of the matter. Nature had subdued and had also compelled him. Even in his present unhappiness and sometimes desperation he did not condemn himself for what he had done, as he would certainly have condemned it in another man during his English phase. It had been inevitable. Certainly he was being punished for it, but he felt now as if the punishment were grossly unfair. It was not he who had sinned against those women; it was they who had sinned against him. But the younger had been in the grimy hands of the elder. Aziza had tricked him with an efficiency which was almost incredible, considering her extreme youth. But all she had done must have been planned by the Maréchale. His detestation of the Maréchale grew with the passing of the days. But he still, at moments, felt that he could forgive Aziza if she came to him asking to be forgiven.

But he knew that he would never see her again.

It was the end of July. Noel was still continuing on the solitary path of his life. No visitor had ever come to ring at the door of Sir Tom's house on the edge of the cliff above the gates of Africa. The inhabitants of Sidi Bou Saïd had long since become accustomed to the presence of the eccentric



Englishman who, without any apparent reason, had dropped down into their midst and seemed disposed to remain among them, friendless, unaccompanied, but not hostile. He began to talk their language. He was courteous. He paid his bills promptly. His servant, Bakouch, who knew practically everyone in the village, was paid good wages and spoke well of his master. All in Sidi Bou Saïd were therefore well disposed towards Noel, but no one had the least understanding of him or any conception of his reason for being there. English people, however, even in those days, had the reputation of being eccentric, that is, of doing things for which no motive could be adduced by the North African mind. What faintly surprised the eminently sociable and completely human dwellers in Sidi Bou Saïd—the males, that is, for the females wore veils and had no say in the matter—was the fact that Noel was evidently a young man and lived without any woman in his life. British eccentrics were usually considerably older than he looked and had presumably become dried up by the action of the years.

Had Noel been a painter, the inhabitants would not have wondered at all about him. For already Sidi Bou Saïd had seen various painters hard at work among their white houses, before their mosque, in their market place, in front of the entrance to the beautiful estate of the De Varennes, peeping at Paradise. But the Englishman was not a painter. In fact, he was not anything in particular. Just a male person with money, youth—he looked young, brown, and healthy—who had nothing to do except sit in his garden, stroll through the village, gaze out over the plain to the distant Cathedral of Carthage dominant on its hill, or over the sea with its incoming ships feeling their way to the bitter lakes. Young and brown and healthy—yes. But he had a very serious, often even a melancholy, look. And as he went by the Tunisians, sitting before their cafés smoking hubbly-bubbles and sipping sweet coffee, sometimes stared after him with a vague wonder in their minds. What sort of life was that for a young man from a far-off country who had no woman at his call? That was what they least understood: a man so young as that living without a woman.

Presently they were to wonder less.

At the end of July Noel still stuck to his habit of visiting the lonely *plage* beyond La Marsa on four days of every week. His existence seemed helped by this one attempt at method in a life otherwise without method. He looked forward to the bathing days. There was a *plage* below the estate of the Varennes, used by the Beylical family and by many people from Sidi Bou Saïd and the neighbourhood and even by people who came by train from Tunis, but after two or three experiments in bathing there Noel had given it up. It was too noisy, and he was afraid of getting to know people if he went there often. And he was still companioned by an obsessing desire for solitude.

On the last Friday in July he went, as usual, to his *plage*. It was a vividly hot day, and he stayed there later than he generally did, swimming, floating, and then lying for a long time on the sand, vaguely reviewing his life in North Africa. It had been a strange life. The contrast between it and his life at Upper Green had been sharply intense. He had suffered severely in this second life, so he thought of it. Nevertheless, as he lay there he realized that, in spite of the suffering, he would not have it abolished, if that were possible, cut away from his knowledge, lifted out of his memory.

He looked back upon his clerical life in Upper Green as a blind life. In spite of his student's wisdom his eyes had been shut upon so much that he knew now. Whatever happened to him in the future, he could never again live in blinkers. (So he thought of it.) He had a much greater understanding than he had then. What he would do in the future, the far future, he did not know. Certainly, in the near future, he would have another winter in North Africa, though not in Touggourt. He believed he would then be completely cured of his tendency to consumption. The improvement in his health had been marvellous. If it continued, as seemed certain, he would be completely cured. In body! As to the mind—he must leave that aside for the present. He would spend the winter in Bou Saada. There he would have some company. He was sure Bernard would be kind to him. He needed some kindness, some friendship. He was so lonely. And he was so afraid of people in his present abnormal condition.

He raised himself on one arm and looked out over the sands. That day they were not completely deserted. A long way off he saw a group of almost nude fishermen casting their nets in the sea. Africans at their work, men who had never seen Europe and who, no doubt, never would see it. Yes, he was glad he had seen North Africa, in spite of what he had suffered there. There is something wonderful in acquiring knowledge, even if it is ugly knowledge, even if it is knowledge that makes a man suffer and lose some of his instinctive desire to trust in human nature, to rest on sincerity in his fellow creatures. Therefore, he would not regret the knowledge of life he had acquired because he had visited an unusual doctor, a man compact of originality.

It was Destiny. It had been ordained. He had had to go through it. And many other things he would have to go through. He felt for a moment a sensation of awe at the prospect of life, into which he had been cast from the womb, in which he was entangled as the fish were entangled in those nets which, far off, he saw those African fishermen drawing up from the sea. Life coming out of the sea; the compelling of death. It had come to him, life with its strange and multifarious events. How would he face it?

He felt that after what had happened to him, after what he had done, he could never go back to the clerical life. He didn't want to live the life of a humbug, and wouldn't he be doing that, after what had happened in Touggourt, if ever again he mounted into a pulpit to tell other people what should be the way of their lives?

For he was not really sorry for what he had done. What he was sorry for was what the Maréchale and Aziza had done. What he was sorry for was not the deed but the punishment.

Evening was coming on. He must go. He got up, dressed, walked slowly along the coast back to La Marsa, found his carriage, and drove back to Sidi Bou Saïd.

That evening, after his dinner in the garden, he did something that was outside the realm of his usual habits. It was a very warm and a very still night, with scarcely a breath of air coming to him from over the sea. The garden seemed close, too shut in. He was restless and went to the edge of the cliff beyond the fringe of the garden. Far off he saw travelling lights, a long line of them. A ship was approaching the gates of Africa. He watched it for a while, then turned away and went back to the house. Dinner had been cleared away, and Bakouch had already gone to his home in the village.

Noel did not feel inclined to read, did not feel inclined to sit in a basket chair and smoke in the garden. The thought of Aziza was with him. His flesh was disquieted. He was full of what sentimental people call 'yearning,' an evil longing, evil because so cruelly painful, for something which one's nature is craving for but which one has not. He felt as if he must do something, something unusual that would 'take him out of himself.' But what? What was there for him to do all alone here, friendless, companionless, in Sidi Bou Saïd?

He walked to the gate of the garden, opened it, and stood looking out. Silence—emptiness—desertion. Here he was at the edge of things. But not far off there was the social life of the village. In these sultry nights of North Africa, under the rule of summer, people sat up very late, often nearly all night, and many slept for hours in the day. Noel never went to the village at night because of his morbid desire for isolation. To-night his gnawing restlessness impelled him to do something unusual. He yielded to it, went back to the house, locked it up, and, carrying the key with him, set out for the village.

In the village there was a large Café Maure in an open space not far from the mosque. Noel had passed it in his walks many times and seen the Tunisians assembled on chairs and benches before it, smoking, sipping Turkish coffee and mint tea, or playing draughts, called by them 'the ladies' game.' But he had never frequented it. That night, when he came to it and saw the sociable throng of village people enjoying themselves, as Europeans may in a club, he decided to join them. His solitude, though he still clung to it, was becoming almost intolerable.

He therefore stopped, stared at by grave enquiring eyes set in the round, rather pale faces so characteristic of Tunisia, and looked about for a chair. He found one at the back of a little throng near the entrance to the café and close to a tiny table at which two elderly men sat playing draughts with the violent pouncing movements of the hands desert Arabs and Tunisians alike dedicate to the ladies' game. Something to look at while he sipped his mint tea. He decided against coffee that night lest he should be unable to sleep. His restlessness continued, and he was afraid of it.

All these men, he thought, looked contented, though many looked grave. He did not see one face on which misery, or even distress, had set its unmistakable seal. All these men sat among friends, or at the least, acquaintances. Only he was a solitary, a man out of place. Some sat smoking and sipping their coffee under the stars in a silence that breathed contentment, relaxed in the warm summer night. Others were talking busily. Several young men broke continually into laughter that had an almost childish ring in it, wagging their dark heads till the long tassels on their fezzes swung to and fro. On arriving Noel had touched the brim of his soft white hat and murmured a greeting in Arabic which had been answered instantly in a low chorus. But now everyone ignored him. And he had the feeling that he meant no more to those among whom he sat than the chair he was resting on. For an instant he almost wished he were back in England, but when he thought of Upper Green he rejected the wish. He was utterly unfitted now for that sort of atmosphere, that sort of life. And he felt suspended in solitude like a man in the air.

Although he had made no friends in Sidi Bou Saïd he knew many of the inhabitants by sight, and there were now many to whom he had given

almost daily greetings when passing by in his walks. Among them was a venerable-looking and very corpulent man, evidently in the service of the Varennes, who sat generally during the day at the entrance to their property on a chair placed either under, or close to, the gateway. He had a dignified face full of calm authority. Noel felt sure that he was a valued retainer who must have been for many years in the same employment, an aristocrat in the domestic circle. He looked like an Arab and was very dark. He always wore wide white trousers, with many pleats in them, ballooning down to his yellow slippers, a pale blue jacket with gold buttons, and of course the tarboosh. His look of composure and dignity was striking. Noel had felt that he was a man calmly satisfied with his life and totally free from fear of the future. Allah presided over him and had not been unkind.

When Noel had been sitting before the café for perhaps half an hour, speaking to no one and smoking his pipe, he saw in the semi-darkness—there were oil lamps here and there on the tables—the tall and corpulent figure of this worthy walking slowly towards it, accompanied by someone who looked almost oddly slim, young, and skittish beside him and who seemed with difficulty to restrain his pace to accord with the measured pace of his companion. As they drew near something about this younger figure seemed strangely familiar to Noel. He leaned forward, staring in the night, and received a shock which he felt as startling and unpleasant. The dignified attendant of the Varennes was walking with Hassan from Touggourt, the intimate houseboy of Madame de Pleunier.

Evidently everyone sitting before the café knew the elderly man, for a wide murmur of greetings arose on all sides, and two or three men, who happened to be standing, gathered round him. One even kissed his shoulder. Meanwhile Hassan stood by looking radiant.

Noel, startled, felt a strong desire to get away at once without speaking to Hassan or being seen by him, and he tapped on his table to summon the attendant, quickly paid for his drink, added a *pourboire*, and got up. But Hassan's sharp eyes had seen him and, as Noel was moving to go, with serpentine swiftness he glided through the crowd and laid a detaining hand on his arm.

*"Moosoo Nowill! Hassan ici! Hassan de Touggourt!"*

Noel started, feigning amazement, and exclaimed in French:

*"You here, Hassan! What are you doing here?"*

Hassan looked straight into Noel's eyes, as people often look when they are resolute to deceive, and then said in pidgin-French:

*"I takin little holiday!"*

*"Holiday! But why d'you come here?"*

*"I got friends here. I got cousins!"*

Noel didn't believe it.

*"I got brother-cousins."*

He pointed to the dignified man of the archway.

*"That man my uncle."*

*"Your uncle!"* said Noel, absolutely incredulous.

*"Yes, my uncle! Why not my uncle? He always with Madame de Varenne, friend of my mistress."*

After this insistence and explanation Noel stood for an instant staring at Hassan. Then he said abruptly:

"Good night, Hassan !"

Without waiting for any more words from the boy he walked away and left the crowd and the café behind him. He felt greatly disturbed. His life seemed to be suddenly all upset.

As he hurried home in the dark, driven to a swift pace by his unquiet mind, he felt that he had been lied to. All that nonsense about having a little holiday, about cousins, brother-cousins, 'my uncle'—lies ! But then what had brought Hassan to Sidi Bou Saïd ? Noel had the conviction that he was there on some errand from Madame de Pleunier. But she was in Paris, or at any rate in France. She must have communicated with him by letter, or through someone, probably the Commandant. She must have sent a message to the Commandant to give to Hassan, and it was something about Sidi Bou Saïd. And this message had brought Hassan to Sidi Bou Saïd, to do something there or to tell somebody something. Could it be connected with Madame de Varenne ? It might be, for Hassan was with one of her servants, perhaps with the chief of her servants. The old man looked like a man in authority. Hassan's uncle ! Nonsense ! It wasn't true. And yet he did look rather like a man from the desert, from the south. He was very dark. He was certainly not a Tunisian. Perhaps he really was Hassan's uncle. But Noel felt convinced that when Hassan had been speaking to him he had been telling him lies. Even that straight steady look in his shining eyes had been like a lie. But why should Hassan be there and why should he lie ?

Walking so quickly, Noel soon got to Sir Tom's house, let himself in with his key, locked and bolted himself in as he did every night, and went up the narrow stairs to the room with the painted glass.

It was rather late now, but he had no thought of going to bed. He couldn't sleep if he did. That was certain. He sat down in a deep chair and of course relit his pipe.

Where was Hassan staying ? With his 'uncle' ? In the servants' quarters of the Varennes' magnificent house ?

He must find out more on the morrow. He would find out more.

Sitting alone in the empty house, he asked himself why, upon seeing Hassan so unexpectedly, his instinct had been to get away from him as soon as possible and without having any intercourse with him. It must surely have been because Hassan knew about what had happened in Touggourt. No one in Sidi Bou Saïd knew. But now Hassan would tell them, would gossip eagerly, and explain what had happened to the Anglais in Touggourt, how he had fallen in love with an Ouled Naïl, how the Ouled Naïl had got a large sum of money out of him, and how, with it, she had procured a husband, a Bedouin, and gone off with him into the desert, leaving the Anglais *planté*, deprived of his girl and deprived of his cash. All that Hassan would certainly tell those cousins and brother-cousins and to that uncle of his.

Noel grew hot with shame and anger at the thought. At least he had been left in peace here, as much peace as his unhappy mind would allow him. There had been no outside interference with that in Sidi Bou Saïd. But now everything would be changed.

Why had that boy come ? His talk of a little holiday was absurd. The journey from Touggourt to Sidi Bou Saïd was very long and, for a boy of Hassan's class, very expensive. It was out of the question that Hassan

would undertake it merely to have a holiday. There was some other reason for his arrival. Noel resolved, if possible, to find out what it was. But first he must discover whether the boy really had relations in Sidi Bou Said. He did not believe it. But he resolved to probe to the bottom of that. His servant, Bakouch, would be sure to know.

In the morning, after a bad night, made restless by Hassan's arrival and the ugly thoughts and morbid fears it had sent coursing through his mind, Noel came down to breakfast as usual in the garden and was politely saluted by Bakouch. As he sat down in the shade of a carob tree and carefully chipped the shell of his egg, while Bakouch solemnly poured out his coffee, Noel said :

"You know the guardian who sits at the entrance to Dar El Manzar, don't you ?"

"Yes, moosoo, he my uncle."

Another nephew ! Noel put down his egg spoon.

"You mean to say *you* are his nephew as well as——" He broke off, then added, "He's *your* uncle too ?"

"I don't know, moosoo. But he my uncle. I know that. Not from Djerba, from Tozeur. He brother my mother."

Noel took up his spoon again.

"Did you see him last night ?"

"Yes, moosoo. I with him nearly all night. Very hot. We sit at the Café Maure talking."

"Was there a boy with him ?"

"Yes, moosoo. From Touggourt. Hassan his name."

Then by now Bakouch must know. Noel shot a sharply enquiring glance at him, but he continued to look placid, slightly fatigued, pale, rather sleepy. He had eaten of the lotus in Djerba. But he must know.

"Why has this Hassan come here ? Do you know why ?"

"Yes, moosoo. He servant of friend of the Comtesse."

"Madame de Varenne. Yes, I know. But——"

"And she coming to stay at Dar El Manzar. So Hassan come too."

"What ?" said Noel in a suddenly louder voice. "Do you mean that the Countess is coming here ?"

"No, moosoo, Comtesse not coming. Friend of Comtesse coming. So Hassan come too."

There was a rather long silence after this statement. Then Noel, in a carefully controlled voice, said :

"Is this boy Hassan a nephew of your uncle ?"

"Moosoo ?" said Bakouch, evidently not understanding.

"Is *your* uncle Hassan's uncle too ?"

"No, moosoo. Hassan come from Touggourt. No uncle here. Why he have uncle here ?"

"I only thought perhaps—— Hassan's lady is coming here ?"

"Yes, moosoo. Coming from France to stay here."

"When is she coming ?"

"Coming to-day, moosoo, by boat from France. Hassan meeting Madame. If you looking about two o'clock you see boat coming in."

"Thank you, Bakouch. That's all now."

Bakouch retired, walking slowly in his large yellow babouches to the servants' quarters.

Madame de Pleunier coming to Sidi Bou Saïd! Madame de Pleunier arriving that day!

Noel was unable to go on with his breakfast for several minutes, but at last he refilled his large cup with black coffee and drank it. He did not eat anything more.

At a little before two o'clock in the fierce midday heat Noel walked to a point overlooking the gates of Africa and gazed out over the sea. In the distance he was just able to discern a faint thread of smoke, rising no doubt from the funnel of a steamer on its way to Tunis. Her steamer? He continued to gaze with concentrated interest, the soft brim of his hat pulled down low over his eyes.

Now he saw plainly a ship, above which the smoke rose and faded away in the blue and the gold, a small black object creeping onward, full of purpose. Before long it would pass at the foot of the Cap de Carthage, would pass by below the white village and the terraced garden of Dar El Manzar, and turn into the bitter lakes; it would leave La Goulette behind and anchor before Tunis la Blanche. Hassan would be waiting there on the quay to welcome his mistress.

Why was she coming?

In her letter to Noel she had dwelt upon projects for the summer and autumn. After Paris and Deauville she had, so she wrote, been looking forward to country life, to country visits in the châteaux of friends, to the shooting season, perhaps to *la chasse* in the forest of Rambouillet, with the blessing of the hounds by the priest, the sounding of horns in the autumn depths of the forest.

All this was given up! Why?

The form of the steamer was quite definite now. One could see its shape. There were two funnels, and smoke poured from both of them.

It must be her ship.

Slowly it drew nearer and passed directly below the height on which he was standing, a fairly large steamer, of perhaps ten thousand tons. A step sounded behind him. The large and lethargic form of Bakouch was approaching. He came up in his unconcerned way, stood beside Noel, and looked down to the sea.

"That the boat from France, moosoo."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, moosoo. The *Générale Chanzy*. She not go very fast. Spare the coal. Plenty time. No hurry."

He yawned and put a soft hand to his small mouth.

"Hassan very pleased. He very fond of his lady."

He looked drowsily after the ship for a moment and then retired, probably to have a siesta.

Noel stayed where he was till the steamer had passed out of sight. Then he left the edge of the cliff and went back to the house. He mounted to his bedroom, drew the thin curtains across the open windows, partially undressed, and lay down on the bed.

What a liar Hassan was! And Madame de Pleunier, too, had lied in her letter to Noel. She must, when she wrote, have decided to come to Sidi Bou Saïd, but she had not wished him to know that, and so she had lied. Noel could not doubt that her letter had been written to make him feel

absolutely sure that his life in Sidi Bou Saïd would be entirely undisturbed. And he remembered that more than once in Touggourt she had dwelt upon her plans for the summer and autumn in France. She had wished him to feel positive that she was going to remain in France till the winter season brought her back to Touggourt. But why should he have thought anything else probable? He had not. But she must have thought that he might.

That thought must have been born of a guilty conscience. That conviction came to him. In Touggourt she had made up her mind to come in summer to Sidi Bou Saïd and, knowing that she had this secret project, she had thrown dust in his eyes that were not open on it, for fear lest they might be.

Suddenly Noel, who had been stretched out on his bed with his head on the pillow, sat up straight. Another conviction had come to him, a conviction that startled him.

Madame de Pleunier must have thought this all out when she had suggested Sidi Bou Saïd as a good place for him to spend his summer in, must have had it in mind when she had, as she said, tried to do a good turn to her friend, Sir Tom. She had not been bothering about Sir Tom and his wish to let; she had been preparing the way for the fulfilment of some scheme of her own.

But then she must . . .

Noel got off the bed. He could not lie still, could not rest. He had suddenly arrived at a completely new and startling comprehension of Madame de Pleunier, or believed that he had. He saw her as a subtly deceptive woman, who had played an elaborate part for his benefit and had completely taken him in by her cleverness in the acting of it. But what astonished him and startled him most was his abrupt understanding, or what he believed to be understanding, of her reason for what she had done. He was not at all a vain man and had very little belief in, or awareness of, his powers of attraction. But he could only think of one reason for this deception, followed by this astonishing return to North Africa and abandonment of all the social pleasures she was accustomed to seek and enjoy in France at this time of the year. And it was a reason the thought of which repelled, almost frightened, him. He did not know how to deal with it—such a reason. Suddenly the dreary and solitary life he had been leading for many weeks in Sidi Bou Saïd seemed to him entirely desirable, the only sort of life he was fitted for after what he had been through in Touggourt. He needed isolation. He needed complete peace, even the peace of stagnation. He was like one who had been very ill and was not yet in sound health, and perhaps never would be, and who only wanted to be let alone until, perhaps, time had helped him with its supposed power of healing. He was entirely unfit to enter upon any new struggle, to try to deal with any unforeseen difficult situation.

He was genuinely horrified by this arrival, for which he could only assign one reason.

A knock on his bedroom door startled him. Could she already have arrived? Could this be a message from her? But he glanced at his watch. No—impossible! It was only just four o'clock. And he knew that ships made a very slow passage through the bitter lakes. And then there was the carriage drive from Tunis to Sidi Bou Saïd. She could not be in Sidi Bou Saïd yet.



"*Entrez !*" he called.

Bakouch opened the door.

"*La voiture pour Moosoo.*"

Ah, it was the day for La Marsa and the *plage* ! He had completely forgotten that. Quickly he put on his jacket, caught up his hat and bathing things, and went down.

They reached La Marsa without incident. Noel got out and made for the *plage*, after telling the coachman he would probably be later than usual in returning to Sidi Bou Saïd. He was resolved to return in the dark and as late as possible. Dinner could wait. After her arrival Madame de Pleunier might send Hassan up to the house with a message. She might announce her arrival, might perhaps ask him to dine at Dar El Manzar. He wouldn't go. He wouldn't see her that night. He must have the night to himself. He thought of Aziza, of what he had hoped, of what he had planned for the summer. He saw Aziza in the green shawl, as he had seen her that first night in the dancing house. And then he saw Madame de Pleunier, with her red-brown hair and her reddish-brown, very experienced eyes and her tall slim figure of a mature sportswoman and her look of the practical woman of the world. Extremely well preserved but with the definite signature of early middle age upon her. How damnably different was the reality of his life now from the life he had imagined and planned.

He drove back to Sidi Bou Saïd after dark.

As his carriage passed the entrance to Dar El Manzar he saw the balloon-like white trousers of Bakouch's uncle as he stood at the entrance.

A few minutes later it drew up before Sir Tom's house.

Now for it ! He felt positive he would find a letter from her waiting for him.

But there was none. Bakouch, slightly surprised, met him with the news that dinner had been ready for over an hour and made no other remark.

While at dinner Noel enquired whether Hassan's lady had arrived at Dar El Manzar and was informed by Bakouch, who, in spite of his apparently congenital languor, knew all the gossip of the village, that she had. While Noel was away Bakouch had met Hassan at the Café Maure.

"The lady had very nice voyage, very happy."

"Has Madame de Varenne come with Hassan's lady ?"

"No, moosoo. She coming only with one maid, Frenchwoman."

When he woke up the next morning, Noel felt instantly that something unusual had happened and that the day held for him something that he wished to avoid.

Ah ! Madame de Pleunier was close by in Sidi Bou Saïd, and no doubt he would see her that day.

When he came down he said nothing more to Bakouch about Hassan's lady, and Bakouch said nothing more about her to him.

During the morning Noel did not leave the garden. No message came from Dar El Manzar. But after lunch, when he was in the middle of his siesta, there was a tap on his door.

"*Entrez !*" he called.

Bakouch came in with a note.

"Hassan waiting for answer, moosoo."

"Put back the shutters, please."

"Oui, moosoo."

Sitting up on his bed, Noel opened the envelope.

DEAR FRIEND,

*I am going to give you a big surprise, but, I hope, not an unpleasant one. I am here, in Dar El Manzar! Yes, really! Don't die of it! I arrived yesterday by the boat from Marseille. All my summer plans have been upset by the sudden death of my dear father, Marquis de Joncourt, which has plunged me into deep mourning and, of course, cut me out of all society for many months and given me a great shock. For I was deeply attached to him and had no idea that he was not in perfect health. I could not go to our country place as the château is let for the summer. I could not go to stay with friends in my deep mourning. I felt a great desire to get right away somewhere into solitude for a while. Marguerite de Varenne came to my rescue and begged me to come away here, putting this lovely house at my disposal for as long as I liked. I hesitated, but my husband added his persuasion to hers, and at last I gave in. The thought of having at least one good friend here influenced me a little in my decision. Utter solitude would have been perhaps too depressing. And so I am here.*

*If you can find time to see me now and then I shall be grateful. Perhaps you will dine with me to-night quietly at eight-thirty, and we might sit on the terrace or in the great patio for a little while afterwards. I go early to bed now, as I am rather tired with it all.*

*But you will understand that.*

*Young Hassan, for whom I telegraphed to Touggourt, will bring me your answer. You need not write it. Just tell him 'oui' ou 'non.'*

Yours sincerely,

ADÈLE DE PLEUNIER.

Noel went down to the door where Hassan was waiting and said coldly "Bonjour, Hassan. Dis oui à Madame. Comprends-tu? Oui!"

"Oui, moosoo."

Hassan lingered, with his bright searching eyes fixed on Noel, as if expecting something more.

"C'est tout! Allez!"

The boy grinned and turned away.

"Young Hassan! Young devil!"

There were moments when Noel longed to kick him and his lies! His utter indifference to being exposed as a liar was exasperating. When he had gone Noel read Madame de Pleunier's letter again and asked himself whether he had been mistaken in his estimate of her, in his attribution to her of duplicity and of a reason for coming to Sidi Bou Saïd which had startled and even disgusted him.

Her statement that her father had suddenly died must, of course, be true. That death had perhaps furnished her with an apparently good excuse for coming to North Africa. But did it hold water? He asked himself that in those very words. She wrote that the Commandant had 'added his persuasion' to Madame de Varenne's. That rather curious assertion caused Noel to think over again the problem of Madame de Pleunier's relation to

her husband. From hints thrown out to him by both Bernard and Sabatier he had gathered that probably in the past Madame de Pleunier had been deeply offended by something her husband had done. He had also gathered that whatever it was it had had something to do with the Ouled Naïls. And now, unless Madame de Pleunier was lying, her husband pressed her to leave him and France and to come to Sidi Bou Saïd where he knew that the young Englishman, of whom she had made a friend in Touggourt, was settled for the summer.

Wasn't that rather strange ?

Towards evening Hassan turned up again. Noel was in the farthest part of the garden when Bakouch came to him with a note. Wondering whether, perhaps, it was to put off the dinner, he tore the envelope.

DEAR FRIEND,

*Of course don't 'dress.' Never 'dress' for me. Just come in flannels or whatever you like.*

A. DE P.

*No answer.*

"Has Hassan gone ?"

"*Oui, moosoo.* Hassan gone."

Bakouch sauntered away, leaving Noel with the note in his hand. A bitterly ironical thought came to him.

"Suppose I do dress. Suppose I put on my clergyman's clothes !"

But he did not put them on, though he unlocked the suitcase in which they were hidden and stood looking at them for a moment.

If he were to appear in them on the terrace of Dar El Manzar what effect would the transformation have upon Madame de Pleunier ? Would she, perhaps, wish she hadn't come ? Would she be entirely disillusioned ? Or would she be mischievously entertained by the knowledge that she had to do with a priest of the Protestant persuasion who had received the baptism of the sands ?

He couldn't tell. He didn't *know* her. He didn't *know* any woman and perhaps never would really know one.

He shut up the suitcase and locked it.

In going to Dar El Manzer he passed by the Café Maure where he had met Hassan so unexpectedly. He was dressed in a white suit which showed up against the darkness of the evening, and he saw all eyes staring at him as he went by. No doubt Hassan had been busy, and now everyone in Sidi Bou Saïd knew all about what had happened to him in Touggourt. And they had also the additional knowledge that he was a friend of Hassan's lady, who had unexpectedly arrived at the Varennes' palace and immediately asked him to dinner.

Well—did it matter ? Who cared ? Not he ! And he went by defiantly, stiffening with the consciousness of their knowledge and the suspicions doubtless arising from it. But when he was away from the staring eyes and the wagging tongues he swore to himself that he didn't care. He was like Sabatier, like Bernard, indifferent to African opinion about him and his actions and his misfortunes.

He turned in to the domain of the Varennes under the pent-house roof and was respectfully saluted by Hassan's 'uncle' who was standing just outside the entrance. He returned the salute and walked on. At last he was in the paradise garden where the white peacocks walked in the sunshine. Now they had gone to bed. On the marble pavement, under the colonnade in front of the house, facing the top terrace of the garden, there was a rather long and narrow table of shining wood, not covered by a cloth. On this table there was a service of silver and glass and porcelain. Two chairs, cushioned and with arms, stood side by side behind it, facing the garden. A young servant, evidently an Arab, dressed in white, with a vivid red cummerbund round his narrow waist, stood before the open doorway of the house, bowed very low, and then held out his hand for Noel's white hat. He was evidently about to usher Noel into a hall, or patio, dimly lit, when Madame de Pleunier, coming out of the shadows, with a hand outstretched in welcome, prevented him.

*"Plus tard ! Après le dîner !* Dear friend, I am glad to see you again, very glad ! I have been in trouble since we were last together. But you know that. We won't talk of it. I don't want to sadden other people's lives. We are going to dine out here, side by side. It's strange and rather lovely to be transported to Sidi Bou Saïd after Paris. I never thought to have another summer here. It is so many years since that last one. *How* surprised you must have been !"

"I was."

"Hassan hadn't given you a hint ?"

"Not a word."

"That boy has a subtlety beyond his years. Come and sit down."

She was very plainly dressed, he thought, in a thin gown of black silk, with sleeves tight to the wrists, and wore a not-long string of pearls round her throat outside her gown. She was very pale, and it seemed to him that really she must have suffered because of the sudden death of her father. There was a look of sadness about her eyes. Her manner was simple but genuinely cordial and marked by sincerity. He had never found her more attractive in an intimate sort of way. The slight bitterness and discontent which he had sometimes noticed in Touggourt seemed to have dropped away from her, and there was nothing warily observant in her glance, none of the consciousness of the experienced mondaine in her welcome and her little explanation. Noel felt that perhaps he had done her wrong in his thoughts about her.

"I am very sorry for your loss," he said, "very. I want you to realize that."

"Thank you. I do and am grateful. But now to other things. How have you found Sidi Bou Saïd ? Did I exaggerate its attraction ?"

"No. It is an enchanting little place."

As he said that he suddenly felt more aware of its enchantment than he had felt before and was surprised at his former æsthetic blindness. But he had been wrapped up in his disappointment, his intense sense of injury.

"And how has your life gone here ? Marguerite de Varenne and I have often spoken of you and wondered. She always wants strangers to *her* village to appreciate it and be happy there."

Noel could not say he had been happy. Fundamentally he was a sincere man. But he gave the best account he could of his life, made no allusion

to his feeling of isolation, dropped no hint that he had any private reason for unhappiness. But neither did he exaggerate and indulge in pæans of praise. He merely dwelt on the things he had done which would sound pleasant to a hearer, though they had not seemed pleasant to him because of his unfortunate condition, and he spoke specially of his afternoons at the *plage* beyond La Marsa. These he really had enjoyed in a mild, a tepid sort of way. They had been his chief consolation. And he spoke of them warmly.

Madame de Pleunier was evidently pleased by this, and she said :

"I love that *plage* too. Perhaps I'll come there some day and bathe with you."

"Oh, but there's no place for undressing !" said Noel.

"I would go behind a bush," she said quite simply. "I can be very primitive when it's necessary, though you might not think so. There's something primitive at the bottom of most of us. Ah, here is dinner."

While they dined Noel felt increasingly at his ease with her. The sorrow she evidently felt at the death of her father seemed to have improved, to have simplified, her. She talked as a woman might talk with an old friend with whom she was able to be perfectly natural. Noel began even to feel that in Touggourt he had never really known her but was beginning to know her now, not as the rather discontented wife of the Commandant of a far-away district in Africa, making the best of things, but secretly chafing against exile, but as a woman who had recently suffered and was now being soothed by circumstance and opening her heart a little to one who was sympathetic. There was not the slightest trace of coquetry or sex-consciousness in her manner, and he began to condemn himself for the foolish and vain thought and suspicions that had beset him on learning that she was on her way to North Africa.

Presently she asked him whether he had now presented her letter of introduction to the Resident General.

"No, I haven't," he said.

"And haven't you even got to know your own Consul, the British Consul-General who lives in that nice country house near La Marsa ?"

"No ; I know no one."

She looked gently surprised.

"After all these weeks ? Are you so desperately fond of complete isolation, you, a young man ?"

As she said the last words he saw her look at his hair.

"I don't know about that. But I'm afraid I'm socially lazy, shockingly lazy. And this delicious climate makes for laziness."

"Yes. Are you a dreamer ?"

"I'm not sure about that."

"I used to dream here—in that long-ago summer."

She said that in a very low voice, as one speaks of something in the past that has been precious and beautiful. He wondered what exactly it was.

"But I lived more in illusions than than I do now," she added.

And he noticed then a hint of the semi-cynical tone he had been conscious of sometimes in Touggourt.

"*Les Illusions Perdées*," she said after a slight pause. "Do you know that book of Balzac's ?"

"No. I'm afraid I'm not nearly as much up in French literature as I ought to be. Till I came to North Africa I was steeped in the English classics. And of course, as a student, I had worked hard on the usual Latin and Greek. But I had rather neglected French, I'm afraid. I have heard of that Balzac book. I'll get it in Tunis and read it here."

"One has time to read here. And one has time to *think*. Paris was a feverish rush for me. I enjoyed it though. I always do. And I was looking forward so much to Deauville and then the shooting season and some hunting, perhaps, with the Rambouillet hunt. And now—here I am!"

"I'm afraid it's a great disappointment," said Noel, feeling disconcerted and even slightly upset, like a man who, thinking his company welcome, suddenly realizes that it is only a substitute for something much more greatly desired.

"No, no!" she said, as if becoming conscious that she had been perhaps almost impolite and anxious to reassure him. "It's only that these abrupt, unexpected things, which bring about unforeseen changes in one's life, give one what you English call a 'shake.' I shall be quite contented to be here for a little while. And I am lucky to have a good friend here in you."

"How long will you stay?" he asked, rather diffidently.

"I don't know. Till I feel I've got over the shock of dear Papa's death. One's supposed to *get over* everything, isn't one? And I suppose one generally does. Not always, though. It takes some of us a good while to grow a new skin."

Noel began to realize that *au fond* Madame de Pleunier was probably an ultra-sensitive woman, though perhaps not devoid of a surface hardness. With every moment he was becoming more convinced that his thoughts of her, before her arrival and this meeting, had been very ridiculous. He must put them away from him. They had been ugly, vain, egoistic, and unworthy thoughts. Till now he had never supposed himself to be a vain man. And what he had gone through in Touggourt had surely been enough to cure any man of vanity. He began to feel humbled and apologized in his mind to Madame de Pleunier.

She went on talking quietly and unself-consciously during the rest of their dinner, and he had to confess to himself that he got some pleasure, even some solace, from the company of one to whom he could talk with the certainty of being comprehended. Often while they spoke to each other in the soft summer night, sitting side by side, he compared mentally this human commerce with the commerce he had had with Aziza and the commerce that he had anticipated having in Tunis during the summer. And then, though his mind knew that he was more at home with this woman's mind than he could ever have been with Aziza's, something within him rebelled and persecuted him, something that seemed to be in his entrails.

When dinner was finished, for the first time Hassan appeared, carrying coffee and cigarettes. And at once Noel felt a slight return of uneasiness. There was something about the boy that always disturbed him. But he bade him good evening with a smile.

"*Bonsoir, moosoo.*"

Hassan handed the coffee and held a match to their cigarettes. He looked very mild as he did this, and Noel thought of the mild look a satisfied dog has when, after an absence, it finds itself once more safe with its master or mistress.

Madame de Pleunier said a few words in Arabic to Hassan, and he murmured a reply and hastened away. Both of them had spoken so low and so quickly that Noel had not understood what they said.

When Hassan had glided into the dimly lit patio behind them Noel said : "I think that boy is very glad to see you again."

"Yes. He has a doglike devotion to me. I took him into my service when he was very small."

"Then an Arab can really have affection for one of us Europeans?" asked Noel.

"In rare cases an Arab servant for his master or mistress, you mean? Yes, I think that is possible. But the question of money comes in. And that's a great help."

"I should think so," said Noel with sudden bitterness.

"But the other kind of love, the devotion of friend to friend, much more *un grand amour* between Arab and Roumi—quite out of the question in my opinion," she continued, unruffled. "But I can only go by what I have observed during my life in North Africa."

She paused and then added in a changed voice :

"It seems sometimes that a Roumi can fall desperately in love with a woman of some African race—I speak of what I know something about, North Africa, Tunisia, Algeria, parts of Morocco—but that the love is never really returned by the woman. Sexually it may seem to be at moments, but a faithful love, what I call *un grand amour*, has never, in my experience, been shown by a native woman for a European man. They aren't capable of such a thing. I feel sure of that. Now let us go into the house. I have a little surprise for you there."

Noel wanted to say one must remember that most of the African women being veiled and secluded, Madame de Pleunier's experience must be narrow and founded merely on prostitutes, unless the nomad women were to be taken into account, which was hardly possible ; but their movement to the house broke off the conversation. And then he remembered what Aziza was. The subject only held fast his attention, when he was thinking of her and of his relation to her. Useless to continue that talk. His fate with an African woman had been played out.

As they passed through the doorway Madame de Pleunier said :

"By the way, what I've just said to you does not apply to the Negro race. We know that Negroes are capable of faithfulness. I was speaking of the Arab race in general. But what I have said covers the Ouled Naïls *en bloc*. Now you will see just a bit of this wonderful house, which always recalls to me the refrain of Baudelaire's *L'Invitation au Voyage*. Do you know it?"

"No," said Noel.

*"Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,  
Luxe, calme, et—volupté."*

She made a slight pause before she said the last word and lowered her voice in pronouncing it.

They passed through a vestibule into a spacious and lofty hall or covered patio, at the far end of which there was a gallery guarded, made mysterious, by exquisitely carved woodwork.

"This has been called a *palais andalou*," said Madame de Pleunier. "And it recalls here and there the lovely work in Tunisia of the Moors who were driven out of Spain."

"It's marvellous!" said Noel, almost whispering.

The patio was lit up by a multitude of small hanging lamps like variegated jewels, which shed a soft and pervasive light over a floor of marble on which were laid marvellous Persian carpets, over long divans covered with silks of delicate colours, on which here and there silken cushions were placed, over a rill cut in alabaster down which flowed a thread of water, lit from below and fed by a fountain which murmured perpetually with a fragile voice as if half afraid to be heard.

There was nothing of Europe in this patio. Low tables, very small, made of scented woods and mother-of-pearl, stood handily near the divans. Wherever Noel looked he saw tiles of exquisite colours: mosaic work: marble, white, black, yellow, green, rose colour; stucco-work exquisitely carved, airy as stalactites in a cave of ice; cedarwood also carved by workmen—artists of genius. The lofty ceiling was of cedarwood.

This patio opened into another and smaller chamber, only a part of which Noel was able to see. It, too, contained divans and was strewn with Oriental carpets.

Noel felt that he stood in the midst of a sort of enchanted spaciousness, made rich by the carpets, the tiles, the marble, the stucco, the cedarwood, and the jewel-like lamps. There was not a single false note. The serene harmony held him almost in awe.

"*Ici*," to vary Baudelaire," said Madame de Pleunier:

*"Ici, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,  
Luxe, calme, et volupté."*

*N'est-ce pas, mon ami?"*

"Indeed it is," said Noel in a very low voice.

"Come! Let us sit down—shall we?"

She went to a divan that was under the gallery, sat down on it, and put a cushion behind her. Noel followed her, walking softly over the carpets, and took a seat by her side.

She held out a cigarette case to him. He took a cigarette mechanically and without a word of thanks. She lit a match and held it towards him. Still keeping silence, he bent his head till the cigarette touched the light. As she extinguished the match she smiled faintly.

After they had sat together smoking in silence for two or three minutes Noel became aware that perhaps he ought to say something. She must be finding him very dull. He remembered what she had said to him when they got up from dinner.

"Do tell me," he said, "what the surprise is. It might very well be this."

He pointed to the patio with a wide movement.

"But I think you said a *little* surprise."

"I did."

"Then it can't be this marvel."

"No, it isn't."

She struck one hand softly against the palm of the other. Hassan



appeared from some hidden place where he must have been waiting for a signal. She said to him in Arabic :

"We are ready now, Hassan."

He glided away, and now Noel saw that there was a marble staircase at the far end of the patio leading to an upper floor. He had not noticed it till now. Hassan mounted it with a boy's agile swiftness and disappeared. Almost directly he knew what the boy's errand was.

From behind the carved wood that protected the gallery below which they were sitting came to them the sound of plucked strings in a prelude, attended in a moment by an accompaniment of very soft drumming, apparently caused by gently beating hands on a muffled drum, and finally a deep and serious voice, evidently the voice of a man, plaintive but not complaining. It was a dark voice. Noel thought of a very dark velvety red wine as he listened to it and then of a damask rose. (The magic of this interior perhaps made him poetical.) It sang on and on. One felt it need never stop, so continuous seemed the feeling of love and longing and of primitive sadness that prompted it. There were words, but he did not understand them. He only understood that this must be an African love song and that it must be old, must have come down through a great length of years and have been handed on from voice to voice till it had reached the voice of the hidden singer to which he was listening.

The music of the dancing house in Touggourt, though it excited him, had never really pleased Noel. Sometimes he had even hated it. But now for the first time African music enchanted and moved him deeply. He thought it not only interesting, from its strangeness, but lovely. And when, after a long time, it ceased, he found himself missing it painfully.

"Who is the singer?" he whispered to Madame de Pleunier.

"One of the gardeners."

"A gardener! And the players?"

"Another gardener and two of the house servants."

"But they are artists!"

"Yes."

"But—oh, what is that perfume coming from somewhere?"

"Incense and amber mingled in a brazier. Do you like it?"

"Yes."

She glanced at him and looked away.

"But how can gardeners and house servants be such musicians?"

"Marguerite's husband, Varenne, has trained them. He has a great knowledge of music. Long ago he found they had natural talent. He has developed it with assistance."

"Was what we just heard Arabic music?"

"It was a song of the Moors bidding farewell to Granada. It seems they were sorry to go."

"It sounded to me like a love song."

"To a loved city and women within it, perhaps."

She again clapped her hands softly. Hassan reappeared, running softly down the staircase. Again she gave him an instruction, and he vanished into the upper part of the house.

"We will have one more and then enough! I do not wish to overwhelm you on your first visit here."

"Oh, I could listen for hours."

"This time we shall hear two voices."

"Where is the brazier from which the perfume comes to us?"

"I don't know. One must not know."

"You are right," he said after a moment. "And the other voice? Will it be a servant?"

"Hassan told me the second singer is a groom."

Again there was the plucking of hidden instruments, the rebec and the lute, again the soft drumming and the sound of a voice.

"But you said there would be two singers this time," Noel whispered.

"There are two."

"But I only hear one."

"No. There are two, blended together till they seem to be one. Marguerite told me in Paris."

"Extraordinary!" Noel whispered.

And again he gave himself to the music and to the perfume that stole upon him from the hidden brazier. The music he heard now seemed to him to come straight out of the *Mille et une Nuits*. The world of the *Mille et une Nuits* might have vanished, but this music lived on and, when he shut his eyes, carried him to it, to that region of legend in which amorous adventure was the salt of life and few things were forbidden.

When at last the music ceased once more he felt like a man dragged suddenly out of a dream, a dream in which he had understood what till now he had been unable to understand, his strange passion for Aziza. She had embodied for him the unknown, to which men, instinctively in search of romance for the gilding of the grey of their lives, stretch out their arms.

After a short silence he said good-bye to Madame de Pleunier. He felt he must be alone. She did not try to detain him. She only said:

"Come again when you like. I am always here."

"I will come. I shall never forget this evening."

"It is better here than in Touggourt?"

When she asked that question he could not help frowning. But he banished the frown immediately and answered:

"It's different. But—there's something——"

He paused and then added:

"—that seems to make me understand Touggourt better."

She looked at him for a moment with questioning eyes. But she only said rather coldly:

"Is there?"

Noel went back to Sir Tom's house, feeling that perhaps he had been unjust in his thoughts about Madame de Pleunier. She had seemed very natural, indeed almost simple with a charming simplicity, that evening. And he had enjoyed his evening with her and had for a short time almost forgotten his abiding melancholy and feeling of frustration. The break in his monotonous life had not been unwelcome.

He reached home and turned in, wondering whether Madame de Pleunier was a straightforward woman, overlaid with the surface ingenuities and trifling insincerities that are bred almost inevitably in one brought up in the great world of Paris and in official and military life; or was she, as he had sometimes vaguely suspected, a woman of tangled secrecies, of balked affections, of bitter disappointments, and of uneasy longing after compensation for what she had missed in life?

Before going to bed he took a candle in his hand and went to stand before the long narrow mirror in his bedroom. There he remained for two or three minutes looking at his reflection. He saw a rather tall and very lean figure in a thin white suit, a face browned by the African sun, brown hands with long sensitive fingers, very thick curly nut-brown hair, on which here and there the sun had painted a lighter colour with a hint of gold in it, large brown eyes with an earnest and demanding look in them. Demanding—what? But they were seeking eyes, full of need, not satisfied.

Was there anything in that man to fasten the attention and awaken the desire of such a woman as Madame de Pleunier?

The face looked young, and the whole man looked surely a healthy man. Doctor Rutherford Craven's prescription had worked. Not a doubt of that.

He came away from the mirror and as he did so remembered the scent of the amber mingled with incense which had come to him from the hidden brazier in the patio. What a powerful influence that perfume had had upon him, mingled with the influence of the strange music from the gallery and with the fragile and persistent voice of the fountain.

Madame de Pleunier had devised a rather wonderful evening for him.

Why?

Whatever she was, or was not, of one thing he felt certain: she was a purposeful woman.

After that evening at Dar El Manzar, Noel did not know what he expected to happen between Madame de Pleunier and himself, but he expected something to happen and got up next morning full of anticipation. But nothing happened. The day passed as usual, an empty sunlit day of isolation and tranquillity. It was followed by the usual sort of evening. He dined alone in the garden, went to the cliff edge after dinner, looked out over the sea, came back, sat down in a basket chair, smoked a pipe, gazed up at the stars. Bakouch went away to the village. The gardener and his wife retreated to their lodge. No step broke the silence, no sound of a voice. The night grew late. Time for bed. Noel locked up the house.

The following day was a bathing day. He drove, as usual, to La Marsa and from there walked to the *plage*. As he passed the entrance to Dar El Manzar in driving down the hill he saw the elderly guardian sitting on a chair under the entrance smoking a hubble-bubble. The guardian got up and saluted by making a very low bow with his arms crossed and his hands pressed to his shoulders. In reply Noel touched the brim of his white hat. The horses trotted slowly. He glanced beyond the guardian to the avenue leading to the house. No one was visible. He wondered how Madame de Pleunier was passing her time.

When he came back in the evening he expected to find, perhaps, a note from her or to hear from Bakouch that Hassan had been. Bakouch, however, said nothing. At dinner Noel asked:

"Has anyone been here from Dar El Manzar?"

"Non, moosoo, *personne*."

And Bakouch went away to fetch the risotto.

Another day passed and another. Madame de Pleunier made no sign. Then it occurred to Noel that she was waiting for a sign from him. She had entertained him delightfully, with delicious food, good wine, music,

## DISILLUSION

and perfumes. And he had not even as yet paid a courtesy visit. Nor had he suggested that she might perhaps like to come to tea in the garden of the house he was in because of her kindness and trouble. It was his part to do something, instead of waiting for her to take action. He decided that he must pay a visit to Dar El Manzar. But an odd feeling of reluctance held him back. He did not quite understand it, but it was so strong that he let another day pass without doing anything.

Five days now and he had not seen her or heard from her. She must certainly think him rude and be feeling hurt or offended. He resolved to pay a visit to her in the late afternoon. She had said to him, "Come again when you like. I am always here." And he had not been once. It was very remiss of him. He would make up for it at once. But suppose she was out when he called? He would have to leave a card.

But had he any cards? He could not remember anything about cards. He had never yet left a card on anyone in North Africa. But perhaps . . .

He fished about in a leather portfolio that contained letters, some writing paper, an ink bottle. Ah, here was a small cardcase! He drew out a card and flushed all over his face. On it was printed:

*The Reverend Noel Herriot*

and his address at Upper Green. He stared at it in confusion. It was like a voice from the past. How could he have been such a fool as to think . . . ?

Where was his memory?

He thrust the card back into its case, shut it up, turned the key sharply in the lock.

If he had left that card on Madame de Pleunier!

She was almost certain to be at home. If she was out he must just leave his name. Or, no, better leave a note for her. And he sat down and wrote:

DEAR MADAME DE PLEUNIER,

*I have just called and am sorry not to find you. I am such a savage that I have no card I can leave, so I write this in case you are out but hoping you will be at home. I enjoyed my evening the other day and am very grateful to you for it.*

Here he hesitated for a moment before adding:

*I wonder if it would bore you to come to tea one day in Sir Tom's garden. I would ask you to dine, but I am not sure whether my Sicilian cook, good though she is, would quite come up to your severe standard of what cooking ought to be.*

*Believe me,*

*Yours very sincerely,*

NOEL HERRIOT.

He read this over and thought it would do. It was not 'gushing,' but it was, he thought, friendly and polite. He must invite her to come to Sir Tom's house and see how he was getting on in it. Now she was here he must not show that he didn't want her, didn't want anyone. She was

certainly not pestering him. On the contrary, she now seemed to be inclined to leave him severely alone. He began to feel rather contrite.

Soon after five o'clock he took the note to Dar El Manzar and rang the bell in the colonnade. It was answered by one of the Arab servants, and he enquired if Madame de Pleunier was at home. He answered in French : "*Non, moosoo, Madame pas ici.*"

Noel gave his note and went away.

Was he sorry or glad ? He asked himself that and realized that he was rather relieved. Yet he had enjoyed his evening with her as much as he could enjoy anything now.

That evening Hassan arrived with a note from her.

DEAR FRIEND,

*I am sorry I was out when you called. I had gone to spend the afternoon at the Résidence at La Marsa. (Don't be alarmed. I didn't mention your presence here to their excellencies.) As you are so kind as to give me an alternative, may I come to dinner with you in the garden some evening ? I never eat anything at tea for the sake of my figure. (You know how particular we middle-aged women have to be !) But just as you like. I leave it to you. Only I think a meal at which one can eat—is it indeed a meal at all, if one doesn't ?—is more friendly than the other thing. Hassan will wait to know if there is an answer. Any evening suits me.*

Yours,

ADELE DE P.

Something in this note gave Noel a sudden feeling of reassurance. It was the sentence, 'You know how particular we middle-aged women have to be.' Surely a woman who was too much 'interested' in a much younger man than herself would never have written that. No ! But she wanted to come to dinner instead of to tea. That, he thought, showed a wish for greater intimacy, but only of a pleasant and friendly kind, without *arrière pensée*. (How many contradictory thoughts about her came to him !)

'I'll invite her for to-morrow evening !' he said to himself.

And he wrote the invitation and went to give it to Hassan, who was talking to Bakouch near the door.

The boy bowed, without crossing his arms and pressing his hands to his shoulders like the man who sat under the entrance, and looked hard at Noel with his bright eyes. Nearly always there seemed to be in them an expression of intimacy and malice which Noel disliked. It suggested words to him. 'You and I know—don't we ?' Something like that. He of course ignored it. He was generally more rigid, more aloof, in his manner with Hassan than he was with anyone else, unless Madame de Pleunier were present. But he bade him good evening, mentioning his name, and gave him the note. Then at once he walked away into the garden.

Hassan looked after him, smiling, and then spoke for some time with Bakouch.

In the morning of the following day Noel had a rather long colloquy with Grazia, who talked a mongrel French. He was anxious to give Madame de Pleunier a really good dinner, not merely a makeshift of commonplace Italian dishes.

"The lady who is coming, is staying at Dar El Manzar."

Of course Grazia knew that from Bakouch, but she seemed to be properly impressed. And when in the evening Madame de Pleunier arrived, escorted by Hassan and on foot, she sat down in the garden to a quite tolerable meal that was graced by a delicious lobster from Tunis.

During the day Noel had received a letter from Sabatier, the only letter he had written to Noel since the latter had gone away from Touggourt. In it he told Noel that he meant to avail himself of Noel's invitation to stay with him in Sir Tom's house during the summer, but could not fix the date yet, as he was not sure about his leave. He would write again shortly. This promise had pleased Noel. And it had made him realize something: how very miserable he had been in his isolation, how friendless he had felt, how forlorn. He had, as it were, hugged it to him, had felt that he needed it and was fit for nothing else. But in a sense that was true. He had not much to contribute to anyone, and in social intercourse one must give as well as get. Sabatier was a real friend, who knew, understood, and did not condemn. It would be good to see him again.

When she came that night Madame de Pleunier seemed to be in the friendly and simple mood which had reassured Noel in Dar El Manzar. She praised the cooking and evidently had the good and discriminating appetite of a true Frenchwoman and considered that eating, being a necessity of the human animal, should always, if possible, be also a pleasure. The lobster especially delighted her, and she said that, before leaving, she must be allowed to tell Grazia so.

"Always encourage servants when they do well," she said. "Then they try to do better. The human touch is everything in a household."

This made Noel like her better and pleased the humanity in him.

He did not mention that he had heard from Sabatier till dinner was over and they were sitting in two garden chairs, smoking and sipping their Turkish coffee. There had always been in his mind a certain doubt, a certain wonder, about her exact relation to Sabatier. It still persisted. And he wasn't quite sure how she would be likely to take his news. Would she dislike it or would she be pleased? She seemed to be in a specially contented mood. There was no look of restless alertness in her face. On the contrary, there was a smoothness of calm and relaxation. And the sound of her voice when she spoke was serene. Never had she been quite like that in Touggourt. Perhaps the desert air acted on her as an irritant. But now he must tell her, and he said:

"By the way, I had a letter from Sabatier this morning."

Madame de Pleunier, who had been leaning against a cushion, abruptly sat upright on her chair.

"In it he tells me," said Noel, "that he is coming here to stay with me."

"Sabatier is coming here and to stay with *you*!" said Madame de Pleunier sharply. "When is he coming?"

"I don't know. He doesn't say."

"But why is he coming? Why should he come? I don't wish him to come!"

As she said this she made a frightful grimace.

There was such an intense, almost such a fierce, sound in her voice that, apart altogether from her words, Noel was amazed by it. His face certainly showed his amazement, and she noticed it, for she immediately added, speaking quickly, but much more quietly:

"Captain Sabatier is an old friend of mine, as I believe you know, but I don't want to meet old friends who have known my father just at this time. It's difficult to explain. But you are so understanding and so sympathetic, I believe I can venture to speak to you frankly. It's like this."

She stopped speaking for a moment and seemed to consider what she would say, or perhaps she wanted to recover fully the self-control that she had certainly lost. Then she went on :

"I came away from France just because of that, because I wanted to get right away from everything that reminded me of my family life, my old life with its—its sweet ties that mean so much to anyone who is sensitive. I was very devoted to my father. I was his only child, and he was an angel to me. I didn't want, and I don't want, to meet anyone who has known me in my family. Not yet ! You understand ? Only for a while till I feel better about it. That is, more accustomed. Marguerite de Varenne knew this. She knows everything about me. So she urged my coming away here. And so did my husband. But I didn't come here to be mixed up with Touggourt people, army people, people who have been in my old life. Later, yes ! I shall have pulled myself together then. But I don't want to see anyone who will sympathize and condole with me and bring up old memories. (Captain Sabatier stayed in my father's château more than once.) Why can't people ever leave one alone ? I did feel I should be safe here. And now——"

There were tears standing in her eyes. She took out a handkerchief and almost roughly wiped them away. Not as women often do, just touching the eyelids with the corner of a handkerchief, for fear of making them red, but almost as a shy boy might have done. The action was so impulsive and natural that Noel was touched by it.

"I understand. I quite understand !" he said.

That wasn't quite true, but he felt he must say it.

"I'm awfully sorry," he added lamely.

She put down her handkerchief ; she was almost sitting up straight in her chair.

"*Must* he come ?" she said, much more quietly, almost pathetically.

"Do you want him so much ?"

"It isn't that. I like him——"

"So do I. But not just now—here. He'd bring in a false note for me. There'd be a discord. And it was all so peaceful till now. I felt you and I could just see each other now and then, when we felt like it, and be quietly alone the rest of the time, as you were till I came."

Quickly she added, remembering something :

"But not to trouble you !"

"I know, I know ! And you haven't !"

"Did you ask him to come ?"

Absurdly, when she said that, Noel felt guilty.

"When I was in Touggourt I did say something, just that if he had leave and thought of coming this way I should be very glad to put him up for a few days."

"In *Touggourt* you said that ? You didn't ask him from here ?"

"Oh, no. It was he who wrote to me."

She began to look calmer.

"Do give me another cigarette."

He gave her one and lit it for her. She smoked for a moment, evidently in an effort to soothe her nerves. Then she said :

"You must think me very stupid to make such a fuss about what is really a trifle. The fact is that when Papa died I nearly had a nervous breakdown. The shock to me was so great. And these last few days I've been feeling so wonderfully better, being all by myself."

'But the visit yesterday to the Résidence at La Marsa !' he thought.

"You know the English expression, 'I'm not myself !' " she continued.

"Yes, of course."

She smiled faintly.

"Well, with you to-night I've *been* myself. And I must ask you to forgive me for that."

She got up.

"You're not going already !" he said.

"Can't we take a few steps in the garden ? Let us go to the edge and look out over the gates of Africa."

They strolled together in silence and in silence looked over the sea murmuring softly under the stars. When they came back to the house she said :

"I had better go now. I loved being here. Do ask me again. And I won't make a fool of myself any more."

She laid a hand on his arm.

"But if you can, without being rude, put Captain Sabatier off for a while I should be really grateful. I may not be here very long. Perhaps he would come later if it's all the same to you."

Feeling very uncomfortable at the thought of the task assigned to him, Noel said in an uneven voice that he would see what he could do.

"And now, just call Hassan, will you ?"

Noel went round to the servants' quarters, and Hassan was there smoking a cigarette with Bakouch and the gardener.

"*Madame s'en va !*" he said to the boy, who got up immediately and threw away his cigarette.

Noel went back to Madame de Pleunier, followed by Hassan.

"By the way," she said in a low voice, "if you do write to Sabatier don't tell him I am here. He might think I put you up to it. And I don't want that. And now before I go I want to thank your cook—Grazia, isn't it ?—for the delicious lobster !"

'What the devil am I to do now ?' thought Noel unclerically as he sat alone in the garden after Madame de Pleunier had gone with Hassan.

He must, of course, answer Sabatier's letter and would hate to offend him. And surely Sabatier would feel offended, or at any rate surprised and perhaps hurt, if after inviting him to stay Noel hung back now when he proposed to come. Presently Noel went up to his sitting-room and sat down at his writing table with the intention of 'getting it over' before he attempted to sleep. But he sat with the pen poised in his hand and couldn't find the words his mind sought.

He mustn't say Madame de Pleunier was in Dar El Manzar. That was the difficulty. If he could have explained that she was there in deep mourning and not seeing anyone ! But she *was* seeing people. Only yesterday she had spent the afternoon at the Résidence. What did it all mean—her



excitement, her anger, her protestations? He remembered the harsh, imperious sound in her voice when she had said, "I don't wish him to come!" And that strange grimace which had for an instant distorted her features. He had seen such a grimace twice before when he was with her in Touggourt and been startled by it.

There was something inexplicable in her. He had felt it in Touggourt. He felt it even more strongly now, and uneasiness returned upon him. Her apparent simplicity at moments was a passing thing. Almost everyone has moments of simplicity. But she was anything but a simple woman. She was essentially complex, secretive, and difficult to understand. He began to be positive of that. And now she had put him in a hole and he didn't know what the devil to do. Eventually he went to bed without writing a word to Sabatier. In his perplexity a thought almost mischievous had come to him. He was irritated at having been thrust into such a social difficulty and resolved that he would 'pay out' Madame de Pleunier for it by getting her to dictate a letter to Sabatier. That would prove to her how difficult it was to do what she wanted without giving offence. And it would test her. He had a wish to test her, to force her to reveal herself to him more fully.

The morning sunshine streaming over the garden as he sat at breakfast the next day did not change Noel's decision of the night, and soon after breakfast he sent Bakouch to Dar El Manzar with the following note :

DEAR MADAME DE PLEUNIER,

*I feel rather perplexed about my answer to Captain Sabatier's letter suggesting a visit here. I want to do what you wish. On the other hand, he has been so kind and friendly to me that I don't want to hurt his feelings. I wonder whether you could help me out by suggesting just the very best form of words for my answer to him. If you like I could come to Dar El Manzar any time for a few minutes, and perhaps we could collaborate. Or would you give me an idea and Bakouch could bring it? Sorry to trouble you, but I'm in a bit of a difficulty about this.*

*Yours ever sincerely,*

NOEL HERRIOT.

Bakouch was away for a long time. But that was accounted for no doubt by his languor. When he walked he sauntered. There was nothing brisk about him. How could there be when he came from the land of the lotus-eaters? Eventually, however, he returned with this note :

DEAR FRIEND,

*I feel I am rather a brute to have troubled you with my perhaps stupid little feelings. Try to forgive me and come to lunch to-day at one o'clock and let us see if we can manage something that will soothe the savage breast of Sabatier. I think we can. In any case it will be amusing to collaborate with you.*

*Yours ever,*

ADÈLE DE PLEUNIER.

*Don't answer. Just come.*

The tone of this letter was light. Evidently she had recovered from her almost passionate mood of the night before. Of course he must go. And just before one o'clock he passed through the entrance into the avenue of aloes and cactus.

The white peacocks were showing their blanched magnificence to the sun. The sea was deep blue at the gates of Africa. What a paradise this was with its marvellous house and terrace upon terrace of flowers streaming down to the deep. Noel stood still for a moment to receive and revel in the full impression. And once more he felt that torturing desire for romance with its strangeness, romance with its intensity and its passion.

Madame de Pleunier met him in the big patio, where a green marble table stood not far from the fountain and the water that flowed through its bed of alabaster. She was again dressed in a very plain thin black gown, and she held a newspaper. She looked grave and rather emotional, as if something had just upset her.

After greeting him with her usual friendliness she said :

"We have just a moment before *déjeuner*. I wonder if it would bore you to look at this. But you must sit down. I'll leave you for a minute."

As she spoke she put the newspaper—it was a copy of the *Figaro*—into his hand, pointed to the divan under the gallery, and went away into the farther room. Rather surprised, Noel sat down and looked at the paper. An article in it was marked with two crosses in blue pencil. He began to read. It was an eulogistic account of the career of Madame de Pleunier's father, the Marquis of Joncourt, who had apparently been a distinguished savant, a patron of the arts, a generous landowner, and a delightful *homme du monde* greatly appreciated in the best society of France.

When he had read the article Noel understood why Madame de Pleunier had looked so emotional ; probably the paper had come by the post that morning, and she had only just read it.

Evidently she was sincere in her grief. Again he wavered in his opinion of her. Again he felt that perhaps he had been less than just to her in his thoughts.

He read the article twice. The Marquis must certainly have been a man of great distinction. Thinking that, Noel felt that Madame de Pleunier, too, had innate distinction, and he wondered why she should bother about him. He did not belong to her world, though he was what was called in those days 'a gentleman.' She must have a very genuine, very personal liking for him. Or—was it, could it be, something more ? As he was wondering uneasily about that she came back into the patio. He got up at once and gave her the newspaper.

"It's very kind, isn't it ?" she said. "But now we must have lunch."

She did not ask him what he thought of the article and evidently did not want to speak about it. And that omission touched him queerly. It struck him as such a proof of the genuineness of her sorrow for her dead father. She couldn't talk about him, but she couldn't resist letting Noel know what a fine man he had been. There was a delicacy of feeling and conduct in that, and he greatly appreciated it.

The ups and downs of his feelings about this woman ! Would there never be an end of them ? She was far too complex a character for his understanding. But he had never understood Aziza either, and he had supposed her to be a primitive.

"I shall always be muddle-headed about women !" he said to himself. He might have added, 'And muddle-hearted !'

As he had been invited to Dar El Manzar for a specific purpose he had expected that Madame de Pleunier would allude to it during the *déjeuner*. But she did not say a word about it. She seemed in subdued spirits and unable to make any great conversational effort. Yet he never felt for a moment that she was bored. On the contrary, her lack of social effort made upon him the impression that she felt their friendship was now sufficiently advanced for her to allow herself to be perfectly natural with him. She responded quietly to his talk and seemed to be gently interested in it. When he remembered the woman of the previous evening, whose face had been distorted by a grimace of anger, and whose voice had become harsh and imperious when she said, "I don't *wish* him to come !" Noel could scarcely believe that he was with her. This seemed to be a woman of a totally different type.

They had coffee on a divan in the inner room, and then, with a change of manner and a sudden practical briskness, she said :

"Now we must get to work ! But not here. Come with me."

They crossed the patio, passed across an empty court, or second patio, in which four orange trees stood in great china tubs in the four corners, and presently came to a shut door. Madame de Pleunier opened it, and they walked from Africa influenced by Andalusia into Europe. So it seemed to Noel. They were in a thoroughly European room with a large writing table in the centre, two leather armchairs, and walls lined with shelves on which were ranged books and musical scores. Many of the books were dictionaries and books of reference. On the table was a huge blotter bound in blue moroccan leather. Pens and pencils were beside it. Opposite was a stand full of stationery.

"My friend Varenne, Marguerite's husband, works here. He had to have at least one practical room, one 'den,' as you English say. But it's so well hidden that no one would suspect its existence. We'll collaborate here. I'll sit here. You sit beside me."

There were two round-backed, fairly high chairs in front of the table. Madame de Pleunier took one, Noel the other. She drew a sheet of paper from the stand, picked up a pen, and dipped it in a large silver inkpot.

"Have you thought what to write?" she asked, turning towards him.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't. It's rather difficult."

"How does one collaborate?"

"I don't know. I've never done it."

"Nor I ! Shall I write what *I* think might do, and then submit it to you for your criticism?"

"Yes, please do."

She sat for a moment quite still, looking rather severe, then frowned slightly, leaned towards the table, and began to write slowly. He watched her, but she seemed unconscious of that. Now and then she paused for an instant, raised her eyebrows, and opened her eyes more widely. She looked then as if she were silently asking something from an invisible power in the air. She lowered her eyebrows, let her eyelids drop a little, and wrote some more words.

While she wrote Noel tried to think what he would write to Sabatier, but his mind didn't work. Her presence impeded him. At last she stopped writing, evidently read over what was written, then said :

"What about that ?"

He took the sheet from her and read :

*'DEAR—whatever you call him ; I don't know !*

*I was glad to get a letter from you and to hear you are thinking of coming my way later on. It is abominably hot here at present and likely, they tell me, to get much hotter. In your letter to me you wrote that part of your leave would be spent in France.'*

At this point Noel stopped reading and glanced at her.

"But how could you know that ?" he asked.

"I didn't. I merely guessed it. Because Sabatier usually does get across to France when he has long leave, if only for a very short time. I felt sure he meant to take Tunis on his way ; am I right ?"

"Yes."

"It was an easy guess. Read on."

*'I look forward immensely to a visit from you but want to suggest that you pay it after your stay in France instead of before. This would be, I suppose, some time in October.'*

Noel stopped again and looked up.

"You mention October."

"Yes, I do. Now we are in the beginning of August. Sabatier's leave will last till then. I know it—from my husband."

"Oh, I see. I didn't know exactly——"

"Read on !"

Her voice sounded implacable.

*'The weather here will be much cooler then, and, to tell you the truth, at present I am not feeling too well——'*

"But really, I'm quite well. That is——" Noel began, looking up from the paper.

"Never mind ! Never mind ! You have been very delicate. You are out here for your health. You must take care of it. He will realize that Read on !"

*'—too well and I have to keep very quiet. In fact, I'm taking a sort of cure, of complete rest and sea air. I'm not ill, but while this heat lasts I just feel the need of complete quiet and rest. You see, I am new to North Africa, and though I know it's going to put my health perfectly right in the end I must take it easy. When you come I want to be a lively host, not as lethargic as I have to be now. So do let us settle that you pay your visit to me in October instead of before your trip to France. I shall expect you then for as long as you can stay. In fact, we might travel back together to Touggourt where I expect to be at the beginning of November. That would be splendid.'*

There the letter broke off.

"Then add whatever you like," said Madame de Pleunier. "No need of collaboration in that part of your letter."

Noel sat in silence.

"Well, don't you think that will do? I am ready for your criticisms."

She turned completely round in her chair so that she was face to face with him and fixed her eyes on him.

"His feelings couldn't possibly be hurt by that," she said emphatically.

"Don't you think so?" said Noel doubtfully.

"A man's feelings! And Sabatier, although he is in many ways peculiar, is as masculine as any man I have ever known when it comes to fundamentals. He is not one of those effeminate men who are what you English call 'touchy.' Believe me—I know him. You need not be afraid of his taking offence. He is the last man to do that. And why should he? Surely that"—she touched the sheet of paper—"seems natural enough. Or would you like to alter it? Do suggest something to your collaborator."

"I don't say he would be offended."

"Well then, my friend?"

Noel did not like to tell her that his dislike of being completely insincere, even in a minor way, with Sabatier, accounted for his hesitation, for his lack of enthusiasm about what she had written. It would 'do,' no doubt. If he sent it Sabatier would probably not come to Sidi Bou Saïd till October—if he came at all. He might not be offended. She was, perhaps, right about that. But his intelligence was both sharp and subtle. He would certainly realize that Noel didn't want him to come when he wanted to come. And he might decide not to come at all. Without being actually offended, he might very well be 'put off.'

"Well, what do you say to it?"

Her voice was insistent now, and her eyes demanded an answer.

He gave it.

"I hardly like to take him in about my health. And, besides, I don't think he'd believe it. I feel he'd think it was only an excuse."

"Even when you want him to come in October? You would be only asking him to postpone his visit, not to give it up altogether."

"Yes."

"Can you think of something better?"

Noel considered for a moment while she watched him.

"No; really, I don't think I can. What reason could I give for not wanting him now when I had told him I should be delighted to have a visit from him at any time, and he must know how I live here? With nothing to do and knowing no one."

"Well then——"

She tore the sheet of paper across and threw the fragments into a waste-paper basket.

"So much for collaboration!" she said in a carefully controlled voice.

But he felt that she was intensely annoyed, though her face did not show it. In fact, she was smiling.

"You and I are evidently not meant to collaborate in that way. Let him come! Why should I mind? I only wanted to have a little real quiet, a little peace, after what I have been through. Even here, with you, in this short time I have passed a few lonely days. You know that. They did me

good, though your friendly society now and then does me good too. But I was absurd to expect to get away from everything either here or anywhere else. Let him come. After all, I need not see him."

She said all this with a sort of quiet intensity but without excitement. She stopped. Noel wanted to say something but did not know what to say. She went on:

"In fact, if he comes I shall *not* see him. I do what I choose. I don't allow myself to be forced by anyone. He can come and see you. But I shall not see him. I am in deep mourning. You can tell him that I am not seeing anyone."

'But I can't say that I haven't had the pleasure of seeing you.'

"Have I asked you to? Let us go back to the patio."

She got up and went out. Noel followed her, feeling as if he had done wrong, as if he had treated her badly, as if he were guilty of something that would not easily be forgiven. Perhaps he was too rigid. Perhaps his scruples, which must certainly seem absurd to her, really were absurd. But wasn't she rather unreasonable? Or was it he who was unreasonable? He felt that she must be longing to get rid of him and that as soon as they reached the patio he had, perhaps, better go. But he wished that before going they could come to some definite conclusion about the Sabatier problem. Was he to tell Sabatier to come whenever he liked? Or should he try to dissuade him without making up a story about inexistent bad health? Perhaps he could think of something. He decided to try to.

In the patio Madame de Pleunier went to sit down on the divan under the gallery. She now looked calm and good-tempered, and again a smile came to her lips. He stood before her and said:

"I will go now and leave you to rest."

"Yes?"

"And I'll try to think of some way of doing what you wish. But——"

"Yes?"

"I remember you asked me, when I wrote, not to say you were here."

"But that doesn't matter! He may have heard of it. People in Paris know it. He'll find out from someone. My husband may have let him know it. Anybody! It was idiotic of me to say that. But I just had the feeling—oh! to be alone and untroubled! Certainly tell him! Good-bye, then!"

She held out her hand. He took it. When he was turning away to go she said:

"By the way, is to-morrow one of your bathing days?"

"Yes."

"Would it worry you very much if I came and bathed too? I'll manage all the undressing very cleverly. You'll only meet me in the ocean."

"I shall be delighted. I'll call for you with the carriage about four."

"Something to look forward to!"

So she wasn't angry! And he had thought . . .

It seemed to him that his thoughts about her were continually being shown up as wrong and unfounded, as if she had intuitively discerned them and resolved to expose them. 'There! You see you are wrong about me!' And 'There! Again you are wrong!' What about that lie of his? Well, he had discovered that she had not the least objection to telling a lie or two.

They might, perhaps, be called white lies. Not very important ! But a woman who, with complete nonchalance, dictated untruths to him to pass on to Sabatier would certainly not hesitate to tell untruths to him if it suited her purpose. She must have thought him a fool to object to the insincerity of that letter of hers. Probably it had not occurred to her that he could object to it and had been astonished at his reluctance to send it.

Her fierce objection to Sabatier's coming to Sidi Bou Saïd was almost inexplicable unless . . .

But Noel shied away from what he was, almost in spite of himself, beginning to believe must be the reason for that.

Even now he didn't know what he was going to do about Sabatier. But he made up his mind that he wasn't going to write him a string of lies.

To-morrow there was the bathe at the lonely *plage*. How would that be ? He began to feel like a man entangled. What an utterly different summer he was having from the summer he had planned and had meant to have ! Himself in Sidi Bou Saïd ; Aziza established in rooms in the Oriental quarter of Tunis. His gradual development of her until she became a companion as well as a mistress. His complete possession of her. His salvation of her from the abominable life of the Ouled Naïls. Their closer union. The romance, the strangeness of it all.

And now Aziza far away in the desert under the tents of the Bedouin, and he here in Sidi Bou Saïd, with a practical woman of the French world as his companion instead of Aziza.

He saw Life for a moment as a powerful monster that did what it liked with men, moved for ever by a malicious purpose. Useless to struggle against it. One had to succumb, as a weak man has to succumb to an enemy armed with strength.

A dull feeling of fatalism descended upon him like a veil. Men fought and resisted and talked grandly about free will. But resistance was useless. What had to be would be. Man dwelt under the dark shadow of decree.

For a moment that seemed to him like a moment in a nightmare he saw two figures of women, saw them as embodiments of youth and maturity. They stood together side by side, gazing at him ; one with an expression of wide-eyed indifference, the other with an expression of subtle purpose : Aziza and Madame de Pleunier. And he was clothed in the black garments of an English clergyman.

At about four o'clock on the following day, as he stood in the garden with his rolled-up towels and bathing costume under his arm, he heard a light jingle of bells. The Maltese driver had come for him with the carriage.

"*Allez à Dar El Manzar !*" he said.

The man looked surprised.

"*Mais personne là, moosoo.*"

"*Je vous dis d'aller à Dar El Manzar !*" Noel repeated with unusual brusqueness, because he was feeling entangled and wondering about the day. "*Il y a une dame là.*"

"*Pardon, moosoo !*" said the man with a broad understanding smile.

And he drove on through the white village.

Noel was surprised to find Madame de Pleunier, also with a neatly tied-up roll under her arm, dressed in a white coat and skirt, but with a broad black

mourning band round her left arm, standing under the entrance to Dar El Manzar talking to the dignified guardian. He jumped out of the carriage.

"I hope I'm not late!"

"No. Punctual to the minute. What a nice carriage! And quite decent horses!"

She looked at them with the eyes of a connoisseur.

"Your man cares for his horses."

She looked up at the coachman and smiled. He swept off his large hat of straw. She got lightly into the carriage.

"I always have the same man. He comes from La Marsa."

The bells sounded as they drove down the hill to the plain of Ariana.

"Have you written yet to Sabatier?" she asked him.

"No, not yet."

"Write and tell him of course to come. I was stupid not to want him. How many stupid impulses one has! They jump up like enemies. Why should I expect to have a time of perfect peace? It was silly. There is no real peace, I dare say, in anyone's life. There has certainly been none in mine. I don't even know why I should want it. If I had it probably it would bore me to death. Do you drive all the way to the *plage*?"

"No. I always get out at La Marsa and walk from there to the *plage*. But to-day we shall drive."

"That's nice of you!"

She seemed pleased by his tone of decision.

"And when we get there I'll find a bush."

"You are a sport!" he said.

"Didn't you know it?"

"Well, you are so many things that sometimes you puzzle me."

"Do I? I am just a woman. That's all."

"Oh, no! I don't think so."

When the carriage drew up on the road that runs from La Marsa high up above the sea she said:

"Please tell your coachman to stay always here with his horses. I don't want him to come down and peep. The Maltese are very curious."

"I'll tell him."

Noel spoke to the coachman rather severely. The man smiled with acute understanding and in an undercurrent of sympathy.

*"Moi toujours ici, moosoo. Moi comprends bien."*

Noel reddened slightly. Madame de Pleunier looked entirely unconcerned.

"Now to find a nice bush!" she said. "And you can undress on the sand. Have you generally got the *plage* to yourself?"

"Nearly always. Sometimes there are a few fishermen."

"I shan't mind them. They won't bother about me."

He looked out over the sands.

"There are some fishermen. But they are a long way off."

"I see them. Black dots against the pale yellow. What a calm sea! I shall love a good swim. Look there! That bush will do. Now you go on."

Noel left her.

Soon after he was ready, standing with bare feet on the warm sand, he heard a call and saw Madame de Pleunier running lightly towards him clad



in a close-fitting blue-and-white bathing costume, severely plain, that showed the remarkable slimness and yet athletic proportions of her tall figure. A close white waterproof cap entirely concealed her red-brown hair. Her eyes had an eager expression.

"Into the sea!" she exclaimed. "Into the sea of Africa!"

There was something almost youthful in the expression of her eyes and the tautness of her figure, the youthfulness that stays long with the sports-woman and the athlete, as if it felt the attraction of strength and physical capacity and was reluctant to leave them. They ran together over the sand and into the calm blue sea.

Noel was an average swimmer, but Madame de Pleunier was a very good swimmer, both graceful and powerful. Once in the sea, she either seemed to forget, or really did forget, Noel's existence. She headed away from the land and swam far out. He did not attempt to follow her but swam, as he always did, in a leisurely, almost a dreamy way, sometimes turning over and floating on his back, looking up at the cloudless sky.

Let her do what she liked. He would do what suited him. But secretly he admired her, as most Englishmen admire a sport. Nevertheless, as he gave himself in his way to the sea, he wondered more than ever what she could see in him to attract her. She was in every way, he felt, more important as a human being than he was. In her there was something daring that he lacked. He thought of the man he had been in Upper Green. Certainly he was different from that man now. He had developed. Whether in the right or the wrong direction wasn't in question. The point was that he had developed. But even so she was surely much more important than he was.

Didn't she, mustn't she, feel so?

And yet she didn't seem to look down on him. She accepted him. She did more; she had sought him. She must have come to Sidi Bou Saïd because he was there. He could not doubt that any longer.

He heard a cry from the sea. She had remembered him and was swimming back.

They drove that evening to the pavilion that was thrust out towards the sea at La Marsa and had tea and lemon there as the light failed over the sea. It was eight o'clock when he left her at the entrance to Dar El Manzar. She would not let him drive in. Her dried bathing costume and towels were tucked under her arm. She had said nothing more about Sabatier. Apparently she thought that the question about him was settled and that he would come to Sidi Bou Saïd.

What was to be done about that? After this bathing day Noel felt he wanted to please her.

She was a woman who, when she chose, knew how to be with a man.

When he left Madame de Pleunier under the penthouse it was evident to Noel that she had set herself that afternoon to 'make up' to him for her evident annoyance during their collaboration, which had really not amounted to a collaboration, in the European room at Dar El Manzar. And she had succeeded in her effort so thoroughly that he went home wishing to do what she wanted but without giving offence to Sabatier. Really she was what the Englishman calls 'a sport.' Noel had never been considered a 'sport' in England and had never been one. On the contrary, he had been a 'swot,' and the only sport he had practised had been the exercise peculiar

to the studious type of man, namely taking walks: occasionally in the vacations long ones, but more generally walks that were short. Now, what with his riding and shooting, he felt more competent than he had in England. But Madame de Pleunier's exhibition of swimming had impressed him, and her apparently complete forgetfulness of him in the water had roused in him a new admiration for her. It showed a genuine love for the thing itself, a complete lack of the wish and intention to impress that appealed to him. There was a good deal in her to like. There was also a good deal that made him uneasy. But he went home wishing to please her and decided to try his hand at a letter that would make Sabatier postpone his visit without being offended.

This letter he was never to write, however, for when he reached home Bakouch handed him a telegram which had arrived while he had been away.

Someone telegraphing to him! Who could it be? As he tore the thin paper he suddenly felt that he knew. The telegram must be from Sabatier. It was.

OBTENU CONGÉ PLUS VITE QUE J'AI PENSÉ SUIS À BISKRA SERAI À TUNIS DANS UNE SEMAINE DESCENDRAI À L'HÔTEL DE FRANCE FAITES MOI Y SAVOIR SI JE PEUX PASSER QUELQUES JOURS AVEC VOUS À SIDI BOU SAÏD SABATIER.

So Fate had forestalled him and proved Fate's utter indifference to human desires by decreeing the event Madame de Pleunier had wished to avoid.

Acting on an immediate impulse, Noel enclosed Sabatier's telegram in the following note:

DEAR MADAME DE PLEUNIER,

*I have just found the enclosed waiting for me. I am very sorry. I had been intending to write to Captain Sabatier, if possible, to put him off without giving him offence. Now it's too late and I can do nothing. All I can do, when he comes, is to tell him that as you are in deep mourning you prefer not to see anyone for the present. I will do this. And of course he won't insist. I can say I have only seen you two or three times and that you have come here to be perfectly quiet.*

*Yours very sincerely,*

NOEL HERRIOT.

Giving this note to Bakouch, Noel told him to take it at once to Dar El Manzar and to ask if there was any answer. He would wait for dinner till Bakouch came back.

*"Mais allez vite—si vous pouvez!"*

*"Oui, moosoo."*

Bakouch sauntered away with the note.

He was away for a long time, for so long that Grazia, fearful for her dinner, came out to lay the table and insisted on serving the dinner herself.

While Noel was eating it Bakouch returned, bringing an answer from Madame de Pleunier.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

*What does it matter? I see by the telegram that Sabatier, when he arrives—he doesn't tell you the day, I notice—is going to the Hôtel de France. But of course you must bring him back to Sidi Bou Saïd and give him a good time. I know he likes you. And it will be nice for you to have some company. As for me, I think I must hold to my decision and not see him. I have just now a foolish desire for solitude and don't seem to have the energy to get rid of it. So just explain to him how it is. I don't wish people to condole with me. And he would be obliged to as he knew Papa. Tell him that. He'll probably understand. If he doesn't it can't be helped. I enjoyed our trip to-day. You can hardly realize how much. If before Sabatier arrives, you care to ask me to dinner again in your garden I don't promise to refuse.*

*Amitiés,*

ADÈLE DE PLEUNIER.

In this note Sabatier's telegram was enclosed.

As Noel laid it down and prepared to go on with his dinner he felt decidedly relieved. It was obvious that Madame de Pleunier was not seriously upset by the turn of events. She was a reasonable woman. He felt grateful to her and very thankful that he was not obliged to think out that letter to Sabatier. Certainly he would ask her to dinner again almost directly. Meanwhile he got on with his stew of beef and potatoes, feeling suddenly more hungry than he had felt before. The bath had given him an unusual appetite. And now he was released from a difficulty. He didn't know how he would have managed that letter satisfactorily.

But there was still that first interview with Sabatier at the Hôtel de France to be got through and the explanation about the presence of Madame de Pleunier in Sidi Bou Saïd and her decision not to see him.

How would he like that? What would he think of that?

This question led Noel to wonder again, as he had sometimes wondered in Touggourt, about the exact nature of Madame de Pleunier's connection with Sabatier.

Could they ever, perhaps a long while ago, have been more than friends? That possibility had occasionally occurred to him, but he had dismissed it with the assertion to himself that it was improbable.

The Commandant was Sabatier's superior officer, and they seemed to be excellent friends. Such a friendship would surely be out of the question if Sabatier had ever been more than a friend to the Commandant's wife. But why did Madame de Pleunier seem to be so ultra sensitive about just Sabatier?

Suppose instead of Sabatier it had been Bernard, the painter, whom Noel had been expecting as a guest in his house, would she have been upset at the thought of his coming? Noel did not believe that she would. She knew Bernard well. Noel had first met her in Bernard's house. But he never suspected that there was any secret undercurrent in her acquaintance with Bernard. Perhaps, though, she would object to anyone they knew in common coming to interrupt their *tête-à-tête* in Sidi Bou Saïd.

But Noel did not want to believe that. Something in him shied away from that. He would put that out of his mind. North Africa, his strange and painful experience in North Africa, were filling his mind, once so clean and so simple, with complex and ugly suspicions.

Sabatier gave no address in Biskra, but a French officer would be known surely at the post office there. And next morning Noel sent off a telegram addressed to it.

TÉLÉGRAMME REÇU TRÈS CONTENT DITES QUEL JOUR VOUS ARRIVEREZ  
HERRIOT.

He did not ask Sabatier to come directly to Sidi Bou Saïd. It seemed to him somehow better to see him first at the Hôtel de France. There they would have a talk, and his coming could be arranged.

The next thing to do was to invite Madame de Pleunier to another dinner in the garden. In fact, she had asked herself. But he must fix the day.

Not to-morrow. He did not want to seem in too much of a hurry. Better to let a day or two pass. Two days; yes, two days. He must not delay too long or it would seem ungracious after she had been, on the whole, so kind and accommodating and had invited herself. And Sabatier would arrive almost certainly within a week. In the telegram he had put '*dans une semaine.*' But he might put his date of departure from Biskra forward. One never knew.

Noel allowed two days to pass. During them he saw nothing of Madame de Pleunier and received no message from her. He could not help wondering what would happen if he did not ask her to dinner, did not try to see her again before the arrival of Sabatier. He believed that she would do nothing and had a longing to put her to the test in order, perhaps, to reassure himself about something. But that would be very impolite, and he could not be impolite to her. On the third day, therefore, he sent a note by Bakouch, asking her to dinner that evening and begging her not to trouble to write but to return a verbal answer.

Bakouch came back with it.

"*Madame dit oui !*"

That was all. Noel had expected something more. But it was enough. She would come. He summoned Grazia and ordered a very good dinner.

"*Madame dit oui.*"

In the late afternoon another telegram arrived from Sabatier addressed from Constantine.

J'ARRIVERAI TARD MERCREDI SOIR HÔTEL DE FRANCE SABATIER.

It was Tuesday.

So he was already *en route* and would be in Tunis on the following night. Noel felt excited and suddenly restless. Was he glad of this news or not? He thoroughly liked Sabatier. If Madame de Pleunier had remained in France and he had been quite alone in Sidi Bou Saïd he felt he would have been glad to have Sabatier's company for a few days. He said to himself that he desired and needed solitude. Yet the solitude often weighed on him. And with Sabatier he was fairly at ease. But now Madame de Pleunier was here, and he had to tell Sabatier that she didn't choose to see him. And that made all the difference. And now, also, he had to tell Madame de Pleunier that Sabatier would arrive in Tunis to-morrow night.

Noel considered about that. What should he do? Best to go to Tunis, stay the night there at the Hôtel de France, meet Sabatier at the station.

That would be friendly, would give him a welcome. But the train from Constantine was often terribly late in arriving. Noel remembered that he didn't get in till one o'clock. Sabatier would certainly not expect to see him at that hour. Better, perhaps, not to go? He would think it over.

The restless feeling increased in him. He mustn't let Madame de Pleunier notice it. She noticed everything. She was very observant. Nothing seemed to escape her. But he would be careful.

She arrived at eight o'clock, as usual escorted by Hassan, and this time dressed in black and white and wearing a black hat.

After Noel had greeted her she took off her hat and gave it to Hassan, speaking to him in Arabic. He went away, carrying the hat with great care.

How intimate she was with the boy! Noel didn't like it. That was unreasonable. But he didn't, he couldn't, like Hassan.

"Will there be a repetition of the delicious lobster?" she asked, smiling. "Oh, I'm afraid not! I didn't order it. I believe we are going to have crayfish to-night."

"But that's delicious. Bachelors always give one good dinners."

Noel resolved to take the plunge at once. Here was the opportunity.

"Talking of bachelors," he said, "I've had another telegram from Sabatier."

"He's not coming!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, he is. It's to tell me he'll be here to-morrow."

"Here in Sidi Bou Said *to-morrow*! Then he's already in Tunis!"

"No—in Tunis to-morrow. He'll arrive by the night train. The telegram came from Constantine. He was already *en route* from Biskra."

After a moment of silence she merely said:

"He seems to be in a great hurry."

And then she sat down in one of the chairs placed by the dinner table. The rather cheerful look, as of pleasant anticipation, which he had noticed on her face when she arrived had gone now. He thought that she looked rebellious.

"I wonder what brings him to Tunis," she said. "If he's going to Paris why not take the route by Algiers?"

"But Madame de Varenne went to France via Touggourt!" Noel couldn't help saying. "That's even stranger, isn't it?"

He didn't know why he said it. He hadn't meant to say it. But it just came over his lips, as if inevitably.

Madame de Pleunier sent him a very sharp look of surprise and enquiry.

"But Marguerite de Varenne had a reason for coming to Touggourt," she said. "I wanted to see her there and she knew it."

"Oh, I didn't mean to——" began Noel, feeling very uncomfortable and wondering why he had been so unguarded in his speech.

But she interrupted him.

"I know you didn't. Perhaps Sabatier has a similar reason for coming to see you?"

"Do you mean that he knew I wanted to see him very much?" said Noel, feeling suddenly as if they were in a contest and that he must defend himself from something.

"Why not? Mightn't it be so?"

Her voice sounded suspicious.

"I assure you," he said earnestly, "that it's not so. Sabatier is coming here of his own volition. I never pressed him to come, or specially wanted him, though I like him. I merely told him in Touggourt that if he came this way I'd gladly put him up for a few days."

"I believe you. But I think I always believe you. You seem to me essentially honest. Ah, here's the soup! White soup! How nice!"

For an instant Noel had felt almost hostile to her, as one may often feel suddenly even with a friend. Now at once the feeling died out of him.

"I'm glad I seem that to you," he said.

He added in a low voice:

"I want to be honest."

And he sat down at the table and they began dinner.

It was not an unpleasant dinner. Madame de Pleunier again praised the cooking and made Noel feel that she considered him an excellent host. Conversation seemed to flow easily. But all the time Noel was conscious that the thoughts of both of them were disengaged from the topics they spoke about instead of being concentrated on them. He was certain that Madame de Pleunier was thinking with vexation, even with rebellion, about the imminent coming of Sabatier. And he was regretting that imminent coming and wondering how Sabatier would receive the news of her presence in Sidi Bou Saïd and refusal to see him when he was there. The uneasiness of life had hold of both of them, although they tried to disguise it by a social effort.

It was not until dinner was over that Noel spoke again of Sabatier's impending arrival.

The table had been cleared by Bakouch, and they were sitting in basket arm-chairs, having finished their coffee. Madame de Pleunier was smoking a cigarette, but Noel had his pipe. She had insisted on that, probably impelled to force an appearance of cosy cordiality, even though genuine unforced cordiality was lacking. Their careful avoidance during dinner of the subject Noel knew both of them were thinking about began to seem to him so irksome that he resolved to return to it. And he said abruptly:

"I think I'll spend to-morrow night in Tunis to meet Captain Sabatier."

"What time do you expect his train to arrive?" she said. "I fancy it comes in very late."

"A good bit after midnight, I think. Still I think I'll meet it."

"If you do I'm sure he'll be pleasantly surprised," she said, coldly, he thought.

"I hope so."

"How long do you think he will stay?"

"Only a few days. He said a few days."

"And then we shall be alone again."

"Yes."

"It's odd, considering that you and I don't know each other very well and only met a few months ago, how at home I feel with you."

"Do you really? I'm very glad."

"I French, you English—belonging to two totally different worlds, and yet there's something that links us together quite pleasantly."

"I'm glad you feel like that," he said rather awkwardly.

"I fancy it's your sincerity," she continued.

He thought of the clerical clothes locked up in his trunk, and a hot

feeling of shame came to him. He tried to expel it, to chase it away, and said to himself :

'After all, who *is* really and continually sincere ? Scarcely anyone. It's impossible to be always sincere because we are all so different from one another !'

"I don't mean that I think you reveal all you are," she continued, "not at all ! But I think you like to be sincere whenever you can."

"That's really true !" he said earnestly, feeling relieved.

For besides thinking of his clerical clothes, he had thought of his carefully hidden intrigue with Aziza, hidden from her though known to many others. What a risk he had taken in Touggourt about that. So easily she might have got to know of it. And then she would have become his enemy, have despised him, have, perhaps, even detested him.

And if she had ?

He didn't want her as an enemy. He wished to keep her as just a friend, a good friend—if she was that. But he didn't want her as anything else.

"And many men, most men perhaps, haven't even *that* liking," she said.

"Do you think, then, that most men are deceptive ?"

"I couldn't say that. No. I don't say that most men *are* deceptive. But I do say that the generality of men would be very glad to be deceptive if they knew how."

"I believe you are very ironical about us men."

"And aren't you men very ironical about us women ? I expect you are."

"I don't know. I hardly think I am."

"I should like to think that you are the shining exception which proves the rule. But—no ! I don't believe you are of an ironical turn of mind. And that's partly why I like you. Irony is a dissolvent. Is there such an English word ? Never mind ! You know what I mean. I prefer the building virtues. But it's terribly difficult in this world to live without the protection of irony. Perhaps some day you may realize that."

"Perhaps I realize it already," Noel said.

But he added immediately, wishing he hadn't said it :

"Do tell me something !"

"Perhaps !"

"If I meet Captain Sabatier to-morrow night in Tunis shall I tell him at once about your being here ?"

"Why not ?"

"Well, I just—— And shall I tell him that you don't wish to see him ?"

"If you speak about me at all, certainly tell him and my reason !"

Her voice had become hard.

"When a thing *has* to be told it may as well be told at once. And now do let us take a little stroll in the garden and talk about something else."

On looking at the railway time-table Noel found that the train from Constantine to Tunis was due at a quarter before midnight. On the following afternoon, after taking a room at the Hôtel de France and visiting the lovely Kouba du Belvédère in the park outside the town to watch the sunset from between the delicate marble columns over the plain of Ariana, the bitter lakes, the mountains beyond them, and Tunis la Blanche, he engaged a

table for dinner in a restaurant famous for its variety of fish and retreated to his commonplace bedroom with a book by Pierre Loti. He dined late, at nine o'clock, then sat and smoked under the ficus trees of the avenue that stretches past the portal of the Résidence towards the harbour and at half-past eleven hired a carriage and drove to the station to wait for Sabatier.

The train, if punctual, ought to be entering the station in about seven minutes, but when Noel got to the almost deserted platform, upon which a few native porters were stretched fast asleep, shrouded in ragged djelabiahs, a passing French official, on his enquiring, told him it would be over an hour late. He added morosely that it was always late and disappeared in the night.

Feeling rather desperate, Noel wandered slowly up and down the platform for a few minutes, then went into the interior of the station, found a wooden bench, and sat down on it with a feeling of dull resignation. He had arrived strung up and excited at the thought of meeting Sabatier almost immediately. Now, as he sat alone and with nothing to do, the melancholy of a railway station in the deep night invaded him gradually and was eventually complicated by a sensation of nervousness. The minutes seemed to go by very slowly. In the darkness—there was little light in the station, which was at that hour almost empty of life—he felt himself confronted by his African life in its entirety since he had arrived at the fringe of the desert. It rose up, as things do in the mind, and he mentally stared at it and saw it as sad. It had been sometimes exciting, sometimes very intense, full of strong and of startling impressions, yet finally tragic and essentially, taking it all in all, sad. He had gained a real measure of health, but how much had he lost? It seemed that his faith in a religion had mysteriously slipped out of him, almost without his being aware of it. He had thought it strong, but certainly it had not been strong but merely conventional. And it seemed that nature, the large overpowering nature there is in Africa, had taken it away from him, nature and the humanity existing in that overpowering nature, which put elemental fire in the blood, and though men certainly prayed in it, prayed often and publicly, even unto five times a day, brought about in them, according to Noel's conceptions, a complete moral carelessness and sensual liberty. In him too. He had escaped. But his escape had bred in him now this feeling of sadness and even of oppression and an abiding mistrust. Whom to believe in?

He saw a camel moving slowly away into the desert accompanied by music and a twittering of prostitutes. And on the camel was a gaudy palanquin. And hidden in the palanquin was a girl he had foolishly, crazily, but intensely loved with a fierce love of the body and who had tricked him. He seemed to hear the fierce shriek of an African pipe and the thud of the African drum. The shriek seemed to grow louder and louder. It shrieked at last in his ears. Suddenly he sprang up, realizing that the hour must have passed and that Sabatier's train was shrieking as it entered the station, a white train against the darkness.

He hurried to the platform, the strange nervousness still gnawing at him, and saw Sabatier in uniform getting out of a first-class carriage and speaking to a gesticulating and shouting native porter.

Sabatier did not see him. Noel went up to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Sabatier!"



Sabatier turned sharply.

"*Mon Dieu !* You here at this hour of the night !"

He grasped Noel's hand with friendly warmth.

"But I never meant to go to your house to-night !"

"You won't. I've taken two rooms at the Hôtel de France. We'll go to Sidi Bou Said to-morrow."

"That's better. I'm only here for a week. Then off to France for my leave. I felt I must have a look at you."

"You don't tell me you've come all this way for me ?"

"There's not so much difference between Tunis and Algiers."

While speaking he had given his luggage ticket to a porter. They went out to the carriage to wait for it.

"I think we can get it all in," Sabatier said. "If not it can follow in another carriage."

There were not a great many travellers. The luggage soon came ; room was found for it in their carriage, and they drove off, the bells tinkling on the necks of the horses.

As they drove, after a few commonplace questions and answers about Touggourt and Sabatier's journey, the latter said :

"And you, *mon ami* ? You must be having a lonely time. I have often thought of it and wondered whether to break in upon it or not. I have noticed that many a man, inclined at first to curse his own isolation, later on is ready to curse anyone who, even sympathetically and with the best intentions, disturbs it. Can you bear with me for a week or so ?"

"Yes—gladly !" said Noel.

The thought of Madame de Pleunier caused him to force the note of eager welcome in his voice, and he was afraid Sabatier noticed that, for he saw a suddenly enquiring look come into the large vivid blue eyes which were turned upon him. But Sabatier only said :

"Habit of any kind grows so quickly on a man. I might say over a man. Sometimes that is a godsend. There are so many lives that seem quite impossible to a casual onlooker. But those who have to live them are rescued from hatred of them simply by habit. I'm not thinking of *your* life in the paradise of Cape Carthage. By the way, have you seen the Varennes' wonderful house and garden ? But of course the house is shut up."

"I have seen the garden," said Noel evasively.

He felt—why, he didn't exactly know—that he couldn't tell Sabatier about Madame de Pleunier till they reached the hotel.

"It's quite enchanting. And the view from it !"

"I believe that to be one of the finest views of the world."

They drove on in silence and drew up before the hotel.

"Are you dead tired with sitting up for me ?" Sabatier said as they got out and entered the hotel, where they were received by a night porter, a Maltese, and a Tunisian native who brought in the luggage. "Or shall we have a drink in my room or yours before going to bed ?"

"Let's have a drink," said Noel.

"Better to get it over at once," he thought. "I must explain that the Varennes' house isn't shut up, and why, before we part for the night."

"What will you have, Sabatier ?"

"A brandy and soda."

"Two brandies and sodas with ice, please," Noel said to the night porter. "In my room. Number fifteen."

*"Oui, monsieur."*

"Meanwhile the man can put the luggage in my room," said Sabatier.

"It's next door to mine. Number sixteen. I took it this afternoon."

Sabatier gave the order, and they went upstairs.

There was a narrow divan against the wall in Noel's room with a round table in front of it. Sabatier went to his room for a few minutes, then came back with his head uncovered and the dust from his long and hot journey washed from his face with cold water. His face was burned to a very dark brown by the scorching Saharan sun, and the blue of his eyes looked startling in that setting. The hall porter was just bringing in their drinks as Sabatier entered with a cigarette in his brown hand.

"Ouf!" he said with a sigh. "The mere look of the ice in that pail does me good. The heat in the train was stifling. I'm longing for my few days of quiet with you in Sidi Bou Saïd."

The hall porter went out. They poured soda water into their brandy, put in ice, and lit their cigarettes.

'Now for it!' Noel thought. 'It's got to be done.'

"Yes? What is it?" said Sabatier after putting his lips to the glass.

"But—what d'you mean?" said Noel, surprised by the abrupt question, which seemed to come in direct reply to his thought.

"I feel you have something to tell me. I felt it in the station. What is it?"

He had been standing. Now he sat down on the divan by Noel.

"Nothing unpleasant, I hope!"

"Why should it be?"

"Then it isn't?"

"I hope you won't think so. You said in the carriage that of course Dar El Manzar was shut up. Well, it isn't."

"You don't mean that the Varennes are there? They are never there in summer."

"No, they aren't there. But Madame de Pleunier is there."

A look of surprise showed in Sabatier's face. Noel had expected that. What he had not expected was that the look instantly changed to a totally different expression. A face is sometimes said to be 'speaking.' At that moment Sabatier's face seemed to speak and to say at first, 'Madame de Pleunier at Sidi Bou Saïd! Not possible!' And immediately after to say, 'Of course she is there! She would be there! Stupid of me not to expect it.'

"So Marguerite de Varenne has lent her the house again, has she?" he said in an even voice. "She did that once before, I remember."

"Yes."

"I suppose Adèle de Pleunier came over immediately after the death of her father?"

"Yes, she did."

"I read of that in the papers and wrote my sympathy to her. To Paris, of course. Her father was a fine man. She must have been very fond of him."

"Yes, she was."

Noel felt that he wanted to say something interesting, explanatory, or

at any rate natural. But he could only find these abrupt, short, meaningless sentences. Nothing else would come.

"Of course, his sudden death broke up all her plans."

"Yes, it did."

"You have seen her, of course?"

"Yes, I have."

He made an effort to break through his monosyllabic banality and added:

"But very seldom. She seems to wish to be quite alone."

Sabatier lit a fresh cigarette, took another pull at his long glass, and said:

"Does she?"

"Yes. I believe she passes days entirely by herself. Her father's death has evidently upset her very much," said Noel, trying to prepare the ground for what had to be said and had perhaps better be said now.

Sabatier made no comment on his last remark and seemed to be waiting for something more.

"She was persuaded to come away by Madame de Varenne."

"Ah!"

"And the Commandant added his persuasion, she told me."

The faint smile, characteristic of Sabatier, which always seemed to Noel half sad, half ironic, came to his lips and his eyes.

"Ah, the Commandant! Did he?"

"And so she decided to come. That's what she told me."

"A wise move—possibly!" said Sabatier, glancing at Noel and then looking at the round table on which their glasses were standing.

There was a brief silence. Then he added:

"As she is here and may not yet have had my letter, I shall now be able to give her my sympathy *viva voce*."

"But that's just what she doesn't want!" Noel blurted out, roughly almost, because of his secret agitation and discomfort.

"I don't quite understand," said Sabatier calmly. "Do you mean that in a general way she is afraid of condolences, or do you mean that specifically, in *my* case, she doesn't want them and has told you so? There's a difference, isn't there, between the two?"

"Well, she seems to be in a rather peculiar condition just now. Rather morbid, perhaps. And when I told her, as of course I did, that I was looking forward to a visit from you she said—she explained that—that——"

"Let me help you out, shall I?" Sabatier said, again smiling faintly and speaking in a calm, almost indifferent voice. "She said that owing to her father's death and her natural grief at it, she didn't want to see anybody, including myself, just for the present. That is quite comprehensible. Grief, if sincere, must be honoured and not intruded upon. When we get to Sidi Bou Said please reassure her. Give her—*you*—my sincere sympathy and tell her that I only don't visit her because I have the feeling that, for the moment, she wishes to be left alone. You needn't tell her that you told me anything—or tried to tell me. That is, if you would rather not. I never wish to put my friends into awkward situations. Just tell her what I have suggested. I came this way to Paris with the intention of seeing *you*, and only you, not with the intention of seeing *her*. So there is no disappointment for me."

He paused for an instant and then added :

"I am looking forward to a peaceful and happy time alone with *you*. It will only be for a week. Then I sail for Marseille. You might tell her that. And now what about bed ? It must be about two o'clock."

He drank the remainder of his brandy and soda, gave Noel's hand a friendly squeeze, and went off to his room.

When he had gone Noel said to himself :

"By Jove, I do like him ! A French gentleman can be one of the very best. Such tact ! Such delicacy ! I'm glad I've got it over. But why wasn't he really surprised—except just for one minute ?"

Noel really was happy, much happier than he had expected, to have Sabatier with him in the house of Sir Tom. That is, he was happy about something, Sabatier's presence, not happy in a general way. Sabatier's being there helped him to some genuinely pleasant hours, and he was thankful for that and grateful for Sabatier's friendship. And he got on with Sabatier who, owing to his lack of self-consciousness and the repose that was in him, was an amazingly easy guest. He needed no 'entertaining' ; he needed no forced conversation. Perhaps from the Arabs he had learned the art of being perfectly comfortable and at home in a companionable silence. Like the Arabs, too, he thoroughly enjoyed a long conversation if it came about naturally. Shyness was unknown to him. Yet he was devoid of the blatant assurance which is the armour of many a fool. And he appeared to have no curiosity though he was obviously interested in the man he was with ; in this instance, Noel. He never touted for frankness. Perhaps because of that it seemed natural to be frank with him. And the disease of the gossip was not rooted in him.

He was neither *mauvaise langue* nor a flatterer. Noel felt that he was probably an exceptionally shrewd judge of the characters of both women and men and that he himself was no doubt numbered among that company, but the conviction of this did not distress him. With all his weaknesses, all his lacks, he knew Sabatier had a genuine regard for him.

During the two first days of his visit Madame de Pleunier was not mentioned between them. They had settled that matter of her, her wishes and her decision, in their conversation after midnight in the Hôtel de France. There was nothing more that need be said. Or so it seemed. And Noel thought that the week of Sabatier's visit might very well run its course without any more mention of her. She gave no sign of her presence in Dal El Manzar and would no doubt give no sign. Noel would only hear from her and see her again when his guest had gone. He would certainly not visit her while Sabatier was with him. And he had decided not to communicate with her by letter in spite of the conversation in the Hôtel de France. He could 'reassure' her about Sabatier when he was gone. And even then he would perhaps not tell that he had passed on her ungracious message. Or—no, perhaps he would tell her that, so that she might appreciate, as he did, Sabatier's charming delicacy. Till then he would concentrate entirely on making the time of his friend pass peacefully and pleasantly.

He told Sabatier about his habit of bathing four times a week from the *plage* beyond La Marsa, and this brought to the latter's mind that he had one duty visit which must be paid before he left Sidi Bou Saïd.

"I shall have to call at the Résidence," he said. "Have you been there yet?"

"No. I've been nowhere. I didn't want to know anyone here. As I'm an Englishman, there was no reason why I should call on French people."

"Like to come with me when I go?"

"If you don't mind I'd much rather not. I still hate the thought of society of any kind."

Sabatier looked at him for a moment steadfastly and then said:

"Then I'll go alone. But let us have at least two or three days without bothering about it. We'd, or I'd, better not pass through La Marsa till after they are over. I might chance to meet someone from the Résidence."

And they had had these two days quietly together without bathing. They had sat or strolled in the garden and had walked through the village and on the second day had taken a longer walk, in the plain of Ariana and as far as the home of the White Fathers of Africa. Twice they had passed by the entrance of Dar El Manzar. On each of these occasions Noel had noticed that Sabatier had not glanced at it but had walked on, 'eyes front,' with an expression of complete unconcern on his bronzed face, and had wondered what he was thinking.

The third day came, and Sabatier said that he must not delay any longer paying his duty visit to the Résidence. Noel, of course, agreed. And it was decided that they would go together to La Marsa, that Sabatier would pay his call, and that meanwhile Noel would walk on to the *plage*. Sabatier, who could easily find it, would come on after him at once if he was not detained at the Résidence. If he was detained he would come later or meet Noel when the latter came back to La Marsa after his bathe.

So it was arranged. They parted in La Marsa.

Once more Noel had a lonely bathe. For Sabatier did not join him at the *plage*. He must have found his friends at home in the Résidence. Noel and he would meet in the evening and take the carriage back to Sidi Bou Saïd. Sabatier knew where the carriage would be waiting for them and approximately the time when Noel was likely to be there. They could not miss each other.

In Noel's loneliness on the *plage*, although he loved being in the sea, melancholy descended upon him again. The company of a friend in these last days had made him sharply aware of the sadness of enforced solitude. He would certainly miss this friend when Sabatier sailed. He realized that the company of Sabatier had accentuated his sensation of solitude more than the company of Madame de Pleunier had.

Lying on the warm sand after bathing, he saw in the distance, not very far off, the fishermen at their accustomed work. A small group. (He counted five figures.)

They had companionship. They had homes, probably wives and families. They were poor, it might be very poor. But he felt sure that they were happier than he was. His seemed to be for the time a suspended life, between a past that was shattered and a future that was hidden in shadow. The present did not seem to him firm ground under his feet.

What would happen to him? How would he get through the winter? And where? Madame de Pleunier assumed that of course he would spend it in Touggourt. He wouldn't do that. To do that would be intolerable

to him. He wondered whether Sabatier had any idea of what he had felt since his catastrophe at Touggourt and of what he was feeling now. Sabatier had not tried to find out about that. Perhaps his subtlety had informed him and he had no need to ask. Noel felt that this friend understood him much better than anyone else in the world did. But there was a reason for that. Sabatier knew what had happened to him in Touggourt and how it had struck him.

Sabatier was waiting for him at La Marsa near the carriage. They drove home in the gathering evening, and Sabatier told him that the French Résident and his wife had been at home and had insisted on his spending the afternoon with them and giving them all the news about conditions in Touggourt and the south of Algeria.

"I was obliged to mention your name," he said, "as they asked where I was staying. They both said they would be delighted to know you. But I was entirely noncommittal about that. You can do as you like."

Noel felt certain that they must have told Sabatier of Madame de Pleunier's visit to them, but he said nothing about it. They were both bent on avoiding any mention of her name.

That night, however, after dinner in the garden, they had at last a very frank conversation, though not about her. Noel brought it about. Remembering the melancholy that had descended on his spirit during his solitude on the sands after his bathe and realising how very soon he would lose his friend's company, Noel felt a sudden strong desire to get nearer to him, to strengthen a little the bond between them. They were avoiding the essential things that had brought a certain genuine intimacy to them. It would be a pity if they parted leaving the dividing wall still between them.

Bakouch had gone home. The summer night was about them. They smoked for some minutes in silence. Then Noel said :

"How long will your leave last this time ?"

"Till the end of October."

"When do you have to sail ?"

"From here ! My boat leaves next Thursday night."

"And now it's Sunday. Days pass too quickly when one values them. I shall miss you."

"I am enjoying being here. I shall be sorry to go."

"Thursday night !"

"Yes. We sail about eleven."

"I'll come and see you off."

Instead of saying the usual 'You mustn't trouble !' or something equally banal, Sabatier said simply :

"Do."

Then he added :

"Is there any likelihood of your coming to Touggourt next winter ?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't come !"

"It has cut as deep as that, has it ?"

"Yes. You didn't think it would ?"

"How could I tell ? How can a man tell such a thing about another man ?"

"No !"

"I hoped, I confess, that it had been a sharp fever of the senses, such as most of us have known, I suppose, such as I have known. About Europe

I won't be definite. But I think out here in Africa most men at some time or another have been smitten by that. Climate has something to do with it. Surroundings—let us say Nature has something to say. There are fevers of the spirit as well as fevers of the body. Sometimes they are fierce but fall away suddenly. Sometimes, however, they don't, but linger on for a while. It depends a good deal on whether they take place in a man naturally disposed to them or are, as it were, imposed upon him from without, as by an arbitrary power in no way akin to him. Which way it has been with you it's not for me to say."

"I have never had any such experience as this before. I'm sure I could never have had any experience at all like it in England. North Africa seems to have changed me radically. And I don't believe I can ever get back to what I was, or to anything like it."

"Then how will you make out your life?"

"I can't imagine. I feel suspended. I feel suspended, almost as if in the air."

Sabatier looked at him but said nothing.

"The worst of it is that my brain, or my reason, or whatever you like to call the something cold that seems to persist in most of us, I suppose, through everything, tells me that the whole thing was madness and doomed from the start and that even if what has happened to me hadn't happened and things had gone on as I wished and planned, there must have been a hopeless end to it all, though a quite different end."

"You are right there. But fever and reason have nothing in common."

"And yet in some of us they exist together, and the one defies the other, and that intensifies the suffering. However, I don't want to drown you in my self-pity. But as you asked me about Touggourt I felt I must say something."

"I am glad you have said it."

"Why?"

"I had been feeling that in spite of this good time together there was perhaps too much unsaid between us."

"I felt exactly the same."

"But one doesn't care to probe, to ask things."

"I'm glad to have it out—about Aziza. Of course she'll never come back to Touggourt."

"You needn't be afraid of that. She has done with the dancer's life."

"And the prostitute's life!" interrupted Noel, brutally almost.

"And the prostitute's life. Henceforth she'll be respectable, according to North African notions of respectability. If you came back you'd certainly never see her."

"No! But I should see the dancing house. And I should hear the shriek of the pipe. And I should walk in the Avenue de Biskra from which I watched the decorated camel going away into the desert, without knowing who was on it. No! I can't go back to Touggourt. I'll find something else. God knows what. Bou Saada, perhaps. I don't seem to care."

Presently Sabatier said:

"I've noticed that often men who make some great departure from the normal—shall I say?—of their lives eventually come back to it, seem to have to come back to it as if compelled. Possibly that may happen to you."

"Oh, I don't think so. I don't think so!" exclaimed Noel, almost with violence. "That's quite out of the question now!"

"So many things seem out of the question—and aren't!"

And then, as if moved by a common impulse, they changed the conversation and presently got up and strolled down the sleeping garden to have a look at the sea before going to bed.

On the Monday they went again to La Marsa. But this time Sabatier avoided the Résidence and went with Noel to bathe from the *plage*.

"I've paid my duty call, and they won't expect me again. They asked me to lunch one day, but I managed to get out of it on the pretence of an expedition with you. So that's done with."

On the Tuesday they drove in the late afternoon to see the sunset from the Kouba du Belvédère, for which Sabatier professed a great fondness.

"When I come this way I never miss going there once," he said. "And I shall like to be there with you. Let me be your host at a dinner in Tunis afterwards, and we'll drive back at night, shall we? I know of an excellent restaurant."

He mentioned its name. Noel had not heard of it. Almost eagerly he agreed to the plan.

The park was almost deserted, and in the Kouba they found no one except the guardian, who was easily persuaded by a small *pourboire* to leave them alone and lie down in the open smoking cigarette after cigarette. They stayed there for a long time, watching the vast view as it subtly changed, little by little, under the influence of the evening. Presently Sabatier said:

"It's strange how each year that my long leave takes me away from North Africa—Tunisia, Algeria—when the moment draws very near for departure to France, instead of feeling full of eager anticipation as most of us French soldiers do, I am overcome by a feeling of melancholy, of regret, by what is almost a sense of fear."

"Of fear?" said Noel. "I don't quite understand that."

"Of an end. Lest I should never come back. Lest I should either by some *force majeure* be kept away from this country or lest I should die without seeing it again. Die in Europe and be put into the ground there instead of into African ground. Having lived so much out of Europe. I have lost the taste for Europe. I believe this is contrary to the general rule, which makes the average man, when his warfare, or whatever it is, is accomplished, want to get back to finish up and die in his own country. I belong in France. But the real me, what at any rate seems to me the most real bit of me, belongs out here in this vast African empire that my country has got hold of. I count in this so-called protectorate. If my lines had lain in France, if I had never set eyes on an African landscape, I know I should always have been sick with a longing to come over the water to the white houses, the palm trees, the pale lakes, the vast spaces—the sands, even to the sands. As a mere boy I was always dreaming of Africa."

He gazed out for a moment between the slender marble columns of the Kouba towards Zaghouan and the lakes.

The guardian shifted outside, got up, coughed loudly, and spat.

"Let us go," said Sabatier, making a movement as of shaking off something. "And now for a good dinner."



Late that night, as they drove back to Sidi Bou Saïd, he said :

"Did you let Madame de Pleunier know about my not taking any notice of her being in Dar El Manzar ?"

"No. I thought I would do that only after you had gone."

Sabatier said nothing, and after a moment Noel added :

"Perhaps you'd rather I explained while you are still with me. If so I can do it to-morrow. I can either call on her or send her a note, whichever you think best."

"No, leave it ! What does it matter ? She can hardly think me impolite as she expressed a wish not to be disturbed. Tell her when I've gone."

"Shall I tell her that I told you, explained to you, about her wish to be quite alone ?"

"You can if you like. I leave it to you. That wish of hers, by the way, did not prevent her from lunching and spending the afternoon at the Résidence."

He did not say this as if he were vexed, but with a sort of gentle, yet half-ironical indifference. But almost immediately after saying it he added in a very low voice :

"So passes on its way Friendship, a pilgrim to other lands."

"Is that an Arabic saying ?" Noel ventured.

But he, too, spoke in a low voice. And perhaps Sabatier did not hear him above the sound of the carriage wheels and the tinkle of bells on the horses. For he made no answer.

When they reached Sir Tom's house it was past eleven o'clock.

"Bakouch will have gone home long ago," said Noel, "and have left the door-key with the gardener. At least I suppose so."

They paid off the driver. He drove off in the night, and they entered the garden.

"Why, there is Bakouch !" said Noel as a large and languid shape was relieved against the background of darkness. "And someone with him."

"It's Hassan ! Madame de Pleunier's rascally boy !" said Sabatier, whose blue eyes were extraordinarily long-sighted and who had the faculty, peculiar to a few people, of being able to see in the dark.

"Hassan ! What's he doing here ?"

They came up. Hassan grinned on seeing Sabatier, saluted, and held out a letter. Instinctively Noel extended his hand to take it, certain that it was for him. But Hassan said firmly, "*Pour Moosoo le Capitaine !*" and gave it to Sabatier.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," Noel said hastily. "I thought it must be for me."

"Naturally ! I must have a light to read this by."

"We'll go into the house. Is there an answer ?" Noel said to Hassan.

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

They went into the house. There was a lamp in the little hall. Sabatier stood by it and opened the envelope. Noel waited by the door, feeling surprised and uncomfortable. In a moment Sabatier turned from the lamp and said :

"This is from Madame de Pleunier."

"Yes ?"

"She wants me to come to dinner to-morrow at Dar El Manzar."

"Oh !"

"To-morrow is my last night here."

"So it is!"

"What's to be done? Shall I go?"

His voice sounded reluctant. Nevertheless, Noel felt that he wished to go. Noel was so certain of that, so convinced, that he said:

"Oh, do go! If you refuse she'll be disappointed."

"But, my friend, you're not asked."

"But that doesn't matter. I'm living here. She can ask me another time if she wants to. Do go!"

"I wish it were not my last night here."

"But you'll have all the following day. Your boat doesn't leave till eleven. I'm coming to see you off. We can dine together in Tunis."

"Yes. Very well—if you think——"

"O, yes. You must go."

"Then where can I write?"

"Come upstairs."

They mounted the narrow stairs, and Sabatier quickly wrote a note in the sitting-room with the painted-glass lozenges in the windows.

"There! That's soon done. But—I don't much like this."

"But of course it's all right! Here! I'll take it to Hassan!"

Noel went with it down the stairs. Sabatier stood by the table.

"Well, that's finished!" said Noel, coming back. "Let's have a drink and smoke one more pipe, shall we?"

"Yes."

They sat together for perhaps half an hour without saying a word more about the note or Madame de Pleunier. But when they parted to go to bed Sabatier, with his slight smile, said:

"It's the old story. *Souvent femme varie*. And that's a saying which really seems to cover every woman. Certainly every *French-woman*."

"Oh, well," was all Noel found to say in reply.

And so—good night!

When on the following evening Sabatier was about to start for Dar El Manzar he said to Noel:

"I rather hate leaving you to a lonely dinner on my last night here."

"But I dine alone every night!"

"And that's just why. She should have asked you too."

"But I have dined there and heard wonderful music afterwards in the great patio."

"Music? What sort of music?"

"Moorish music, sung and played by Monsieur de Varenne's servants."

"That makes no difference. She must have known that the boat for France goes to-morrow and that I should probably sail by it."

"Perhaps that's why she asked you for to-night. She may have suddenly decided that she didn't want you to go without seeing you, as you are a friend of hers. I think it must be that. She didn't mean to see you because she wasn't seeing anybody——"

"Except the people at the Résidence and you!"

"Well—scarcely anybody," said Noel uncomfortably. "And then at almost the last minute she felt she must see you."

"I believe that in spite of her message, which you gave me, she felt sure

I should try to see her, and when she found I was not going to she sent Hassan. However, it doesn't much matter. I have to go. Let me find you up when I come back."

"Rather!"

"I shan't stay very late."

"I'll be in the garden."

Sabatier went off, and Noel settled down to a lonely dinner and evening without conversation.

He expected Sabatier back not later than about eleven o'clock or soon after. But when he looked for the third or fourth time at his watch and found the hands pointing to a quarter to midnight he began to feel restless, then presently hurt, and at last even angry.

What could have kept Sabatier so late at Dar El Manzar? What could Madame de Pleunier and he have to say to each other that took so much time? Sabatier knew that his host would sit up for him. He might surely have remembered that, perhaps even have told it to his hostess, and come back at a reasonable hour.

At midnight Noel got up from his chair and decided that he would go to bed and leave Sabatier to lock up the house.

But when he got to the house door he hesitated. He didn't wish to seem ungracious, to show by his conduct any feeling of impatience or anger. Perhaps he would give Sabatier a few more minutes. And he paced up and down in the dark garden till he began to burn with something like indignation. This was neglect, surely, and neglect of him on his guest's last evening in Sidi Bou Said.

"He shan't find me sitting up. I'll tell him to-morrow I was tired and went to bed at eleven."

But just then he heard the creak of the garden gate. Immediately, treading softly, he hurried back to his chair, sat down, struck a match, and took up his pipe.

"*Mon Dieu*, Herriot, are you still up?" said Sabatier, coming on to the terrace.

Noel put the match to his pipe, which he had laid down stuffed on the table, drew on it carefully, and then said in a casual voice:

"Yes; it's such a lovely night and I was enjoying it. Is it so very late?"

"I'm afraid it is."

Sabatier did not sit down. It seemed to Noel that he was hesitating about something. Perhaps he wanted to go immediately to bed.

This surmise made Noel feel more angry, hot with anger. But he was determined not to show it.

"Don't you want a drink?" he said, looking up from his chair with accusing eyes, though his manner was calm, even casual.

"I don't think I do, thank you. We had champagne at dinner. And too much drink is bad for a man in this climate."

"Well then——" Noel broke off.

But he had to go on, had to say it.

"I dare say you're ready for bed. But I think I'll sit up a little longer. I do so enjoy these wonderful African nights."

Even while he said this he was fully expecting Sabatier to sit down. Surely he would not be so unfriendly as to go away without one word about

his evening to the man who had dined alone, waited up alone till past midnight, on their last night together in Sidi Bou Saïd.

Yet that was what he did.

"Well, I think perhaps I will turn in," he said in a stiff, constrained voice. "It really is very late. You won't come?"

"No. I'll stay out here till I've finished this pipe."

"Good night then."

"Good night."

Sabatier turned and went into the house.

"We're not friends. He's not really my friend. I haven't any friends. Not one."

Noel asserted this to himself with intense bitterness. Then he sprang up from his chair, threw down his still-lit pipe, and walked away into the darkness of the garden, going seawards.

Sabatier's return so late and the scene which followed it made upon Noel an impression so painful that he felt as if a disaster had overtaken him. He knew now that the friendship he believed Sabatier to have for him had kept him from something akin to despair. And now that had failed him.

And why? He could only account for Sabatier's strange and unfriendly demeanour by something that must have happened at Dar El Manzar and that had been kept secret from him. But what could it have been? Noel couldn't imagine. And again all his uneasiness about Madame de Pleunier came back to him, and again he wondered about her relation to Sabatier.

Could Madame de Pleunier have spoken to Sabatier against him? Or was it possible that they had been lovers and that some lover's jealousy still lingered in Sabatier and accounted for his changed manner to one who was surely his friend?

How was Noel going to meet Sabatier in the morning? How was he going to get through the day with him, to dine with him in Tunis, to see him off on the boat?

He felt as if he couldn't endure it and wished Sabatier were already gone.

But Madame de Pleunier would still be in Sidi Bou Saïd. He felt like one walking on quicksands.

After a too-short night of troubled sleep he woke and felt instantly that something unpleasant had happened to him, that something unpleasant awaited him. What? For a moment he could not remember. Then 'Sabatier!' he thought. The man who had been his friend and who was no longer his friend.

He got up, determined to carry things through somehow with as much courage and aplomb as he could muster, made his toilet, and went down into the garden to breakfast. As he came out he smelled coffee and found Sabatier sitting by the breakfast table with a book in his hand.

"Oh, good morning," he exclaimed in what he believed to be a hearty voice. "Am I later than usual?"

"Not a bit. But I was rather early. I've already packed most of my belongings."

"Are you in such a hurry to be off?" said Noel and wished immediately that he had not said it.

But Sabatier must be feeling as he himself did. Their friendship being over, better to break away as quickly as possible. Noel even wondered

whether somehow he could get out of the dinner in Tunis and the farewell at the boat without being rude.

"No," said Sabatier, looking at Noel with a very direct gaze of his blue eyes. "I have liked being here with you very much. I shall always remember most of this visit with a great deal of pleasure."

"But not all of it?" Noel had to say.

"No, not quite all of it."

At this moment Bakouch came from the servants' quarters with their breakfast and arranged it on the table with his usual nonchalant languor, which was combined, however, with competence.

Noel poured out the coffee.

"The day I leave Africa is never a red-letter day with me," said Sabatier as he took his cup. "I have it in me to envy you who are staying."

"Oh, no one need envy me!" said Noel hastily. "I'm the last man to be envied."

"Not quite the last, I think, in spite of all that has happened," said Sabatier gravely.

"Would you change with me?"

"No. But I wouldn't change with any man. It would be too risky. I'd rather handle my own fate, whatever it is."

"Your reason?"

"Because I believe it's the fate that is natural to me, the fate I'm cut out for, the fate I'm best suited to endure."

"That's a strange belief! I've never thought of fate in that way."

He was silent for a moment, then added:

"My fate out here seems to have been the most unsuitable fate that could have been devised for me. Almost preposterous! In fact, quite preposterous! But are you what's called a fatalist?"

"Of course!"

"Why of course?"

"I think everyone whose life, the greater part of it, is passed out here becomes one."

Noel's comment on this was a dreary "I don't suppose, after next winter, any more of my life will be spent out here. I don't belong here. That's certain. Though I don't know how life in England will suit me now."

He stopped, hesitated, then said:

"I've nothing really to look forward to."

As he said that he thought of the clergyman's clothes locked up in his trunk and wondered whether, influenced by champagne, Sabatier could have let out his secret to Madame de Pleunier. He longed to ask him. But to ask him might be to insult him. But, if Sabatier had told, Noel would surely soon learn it from Madame de Pleunier. Clever and subtle in many ways as he believed her to be, she would almost certainly, if only by some difference in her manner, give him a hint of her knowledge. Could Sabatier have told?

"You can't know that," said Sabatier. "That's something that no man can know. There is always a possibility round the corner."

"It's easy to be optimistic for another," said Noel with a bitterness he hadn't intended to show. "Have some more coffee?"

"No, thank you. I've finished."

The day crept by in a lame sort of way. All through it Noel made a

valiant attempt to seem natural and was cheery as possible. But he was perpetually conscious of the wall that had risen up between them. More than once, in a desperation of mind, he thought of making a wild attempt to break it down somehow and considered ways and means of doing that. Perhaps the best way would be to break the silence about Madame de Pleunier which existed between them. Her name had not once been mentioned since Sabatier had started the night before for Dar El Manzar. This was entirely unnatural. They both knew it, and yet neither uttered her name.

"I must! I will!" Noel said to himself.

But something that he couldn't overcome held him back. And the slow day drew on towards evening.

The carriage that was to take them to Tunis had been ordered to be at the house not later than six o'clock. That hour arrived, and Noel had not been able to make his attempt.

Sabatier's luggage was carried down. While it was being bestowed in the carriage Sabatier, who was with Noel in the garden, ready to go, suddenly said:

"Herriot, perhaps you don't want to come with me to Tunis and the ship! It may be boring for you, throw you out of your usual routine. Be quite frank with me! Wouldn't you rather say good-bye to me here and now?"

"No, no, no!" exclaimed Noel. "I do want to come. Of course I am coming!"

"Well, it's very good of you. And I'm grateful."

They went to the carriage. Noel had suddenly made up his mind that he wouldn't, couldn't, let Sabatier go without attempting to break down that wall.

When they got to Tunis it was evening. Noel had not said what he meant to say. He couldn't speak about something so important to him in a rattling carriage, hemmed in by luggage, with the perpetual sound of the bells on the horses' necks in his ears. There must be some quiet, some privacy about them before he could speak. Perhaps he could speak in the restaurant or outside a not-crowded café, while they sat in the air sipping their *apéritifs* before dinner.

They drove first to the Hôtel de France, where the luggage was unloaded to wait till they started for the harbour. Then they went out for a stroll under the ficus trees that line the long avenue which is the glory of the city of Tunis.

In the summer evenings and nights it is crowded with the population taking the air after the heat of the day. Children and dogs rush about. Italian voices are audible on all sides, talking volubly of the events of the day; voluminous Italian women, who have been born and bred in Tunisia, sit together on very small chairs, exchanging gossip with the voices of peacocks; moon-faced Tunisians with proud stomachs move slowly by, their sock suspenders showing against their brown legs; larkish youths of various nations, with light-coloured caps, not unlike jockey caps, set jauntily on their dark heads thickly covered with corrugated and well-oiled black hair, and cigarettes drooping from their mouths, march along in lines on the lookout for girls, swinging their narrow hips, their dark eyes alight with the fires of lust; French officials with little black beards, wearing Panama hats

and alpaca jackets, stand in groups talking politics; and soldiers of various African regiments, Zouaves, Chasseurs d'Afrique, Tirailleurs, Spahis, free from their casernes, lounge along in the shadows with their hardy air of being ready for anything and broken in by Africa from the worn-out conventions of Europe. And among them all are the newsboys calling the last editions at the tops of their voices, while the swift-fingered girls look keenly out from the kiosks where illustrated papers may be bought, with cigarettes and long thin cigars, and now and then brown monks go by, or two White Fathers of Africa, sturdy broad-shouldered champions of the Catholic faith, militant pioneers of religion in the wild places of the earth, bearded and stalwart, wearing their crosses.

Outside the great iron railings of the Résidence stand the native sentries. And the cafés on either side of the rows of trees planted to blot out the fierce rays of the sun by day and to make a soft mystery of this pleasure-ground by night are thronged with people sipping *apéritifs*, syrups, and orangeade.

After strolling up and down for a few minutes almost in silence, observing the crowd, Sabatier said:

"What about an *apéritif* now?"

"Yes, I'm ready," said Noel. "Can we go to a quiet place?"

"Rather difficult to find at this hour, I'm afraid," said Sabatier with a glance at Noel and away. "They are all thronged. What d'you say to that corner one by the turn to the Tunisia Palace Hotel?"

"Yes, let us go there. Where's your restaurant for later?"

"Up the road beyond the Résidence on the left. The first floor. If you like to be quiet——"

"Don't you?"

"Yes. I'll send a *chasseur* to order a table for us in the far corner of the balcony."

"There's a balcony then?"

"Yes. Very narrow. Just room for a few tables in line. You have no one on either side of you and can talk without being overheard."

"I should like that. I've got something I want to say to you before you go."

Noel said this with the sudden hardihood of a sensitive man who is forcing himself to take a line and to say something difficult. He even flushed as he said it.

Sabatier didn't seem to notice this and called for a *chasseur* as they took a couple of seats on the pavement. The *chasseur* was an Italian. Sabatier gave him directions in that language and he hurried away.

"How many languages do you speak?" asked Noel enviously.

"Not very many. I can manage four European languages, Arabic and two or three dialects."

"I wish I could do as much. What will you have?"

They ordered *apéritifs* and sat watching the perpetual passers-by.

"I shall miss this sort of thing in Europe," Sabatier said presently.

"Even in Paris?"

"Especially in Paris. The crowd there, considered as a whole, has an ugly stamp of what is called civilization upon it. Here there's a jolly uncivilized, or at worst only semi-civilized, look. I have often heard Tunis called a mongrel city. And so no doubt it is. But though I like to see a

woman or a man who is obviously 'de race,' unmistakably pure bred, a true Bedouin, for instance, or even a rabbi who, by his looks, might be a direct descendant from Shylock, a mixed-up, scatterbrained, scatter-charactered crowd such as this, with the African imprint upon it, which is seldom, or never, lacking, pleases me mightily."

"I like it too," said Noel in a half-wistful voice. "But it makes me feel such an outsider, so different from you. And then when I think of some day going back to England I know I shall feel an outsider there too."

"Things may change. Must change. And you with them. You came out here to get health, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And your health is ever so much better."

"Oh, yes."

"Progress?"

"Physical progress—yes."

"There may be another sort of progress that you don't realize yet. I, as a fatalist, believe that what has happened to you had to happen."

"For what reason?"

"There the Decider, the Designer, the Hidden One, has the better of us. But you may know later on. We shed a lot of ignorance in our lives as we go along."

After that they were silent till the chasseur came back and told Sabatier that a table was reserved for them on the balcony of the restaurant.

A little after eight they went there and mounted to a fairly large room on the first floor. At small tables many people, French, Italian, Maltese were eating.

Beyond the open windows stretched a narrow balcony facing the avenue, and a waiter with bulbous hot eyes and malignant moustaches conducted them to a table at the end of this balcony on the right.

"Shall I order? It's my dinner," said Sabatier.

"Thank you very much. Yes, please do."

After a careful study of the menu—Sabatier was very French when food was in question—the dinner was ordered.

"Our last dinner together—for the present!" Sabatier said.

Noel remembered his thought that when Sabatier had sailed that night they would probably not meet again and said nothing. Sabatier noticed his silence, which did not seem to indicate assent to his final words.

"You'll tell me what you have on your mind presently," he said. "We've got"—he looked at his watch—"a good hour and a half before we need start for the ship. If really you are coming so far."

"Yes, I'll come. Just as far as the ship. I won't come on board. You'll be wanting to turn in."

"No. I shall be on deck all through the bitter lakes and look out for the lights of Sidi Bou Said as we pass the Cap. A good-bye to Africa! Here comes dinner!"

Not till they had finished it and were smoking a couple of cigars over their coffee could Noel at last make up his mind to say what he felt he must say, because he would be too miserable after Sabatier had gone if he did not say it.

"Last night," he then said, speaking with difficulty but with a sort of, at first, rigid determination, "when you came back to the house I was upset



by your manner. Please forgive me for saying this. If I don't I shall be very unhappy."

"Of course I forgive you. Go on."

"I was surprised, of course, after what Madame de Pleunier had said to me, by her invitation to you. Her leaving me out was rather odd too. But I really didn't mind that. She was an old friend of yours and might prefer to see you alone."

"I wished she had asked you. You remember what I said."

"Yes. But did you really wish me to come? I don't think you did."

He stopped speaking. But Sabatier did not say anything. So he went on:

"However, that's not the point. What upset me was your manner and what you did when you came back to the house. I had sat up for you till long past midnight. When at last you came I thought at least you would sit down with me and stay for a few minutes of talk, say something about your evening, and so on. It was our last night together in Sidi Bou Saïd."

"Yes."

"But you said nothing, told me nothing of your evening, didn't even sit down for a moment, just stood and then went off to bed, leaving me there."

"I did say, 'Aren't you coming?' or something of the sort."

"Yes. But it was all so cold and extraordinary and so unlike you. I don't want to seem sentimental, but I felt I had lost a friend. No. Not even that! I felt we had never been really friends and wondered how I should get through to-day with you. I dreaded this morning. You had been so kind and friendly to me in Touggourt, when I was in trouble there, that I had come to rely on you. Often I had felt, especially after what happened about Aziza, that you were the only real friend I had in North Africa. Your coming to Sidi Bou Saïd had been a great help to me, greater, I dare say, than you can imagine. And that it should all end in this upset me badly. I felt embittered. I stayed till very late in the garden, away from the house, and tried to get at what might have happened to cause such a change in you. Two or three things occurred to me."

"What were they?"

"You won't be angry if I tell you one of them?"

"It would be very difficult for me to feel angry with you, I believe. But about a feeling it's wiser, perhaps, not to make a promise. I don't think I shall be angry."

"You remember you refused a drink because you said you had been drinking champagne at dinner?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"Trying to think what could possibly have caused your manner and behaviour, it just struck me that possibly, quite by accident, perhaps in the heat of conversation and having drunk a good deal of champagne, you had let out to Madame de Pleunier that I was a clergyman——"

"Ah!" interjected Sabatier.

"—and that directly you had done it you had regretted it and, meeting me again, had felt very uncomfortable about it and that that had caused your stiffness of manner and the abrupt way in which you left me."

"You thought that!" said Sabatier.

"Yes."

Sabatier said nothing more for a moment, and the faint smile Noel was beginning to know so well appeared on his face.

"Are you angry?" said Noel anxiously.

"Why be angry? Why expect one's character to be completely understood by another? No, I'm not angry. I don't know that I'm even surprised. It's generally stupid to be surprised at anything we mortals say, or do, or think, however *unexpected* they are supposed to be. But I'll set your mind at rest. I didn't tell Madame de Pleunier last night that I knew you were a clergyman. Even a few glasses of champagne couldn't have made me do that."

"Do forgive me! I was casting about—trying to find a reason!"

"And the worst of it is I can't give you one," said Sabatier firmly. "I should like to if it were possible, but I can't."

"No?"

"No. You said that two or three things occurred to you. You have now told me one. So that's out of the way. What about the other, or others?"

"Oh—it's hardly worth while, perhaps—I'm afraid that all that has happened and living so much alone has made me a bit morbid, and perhaps suspicious."

"Tell me. Clear your mind of it. Much better!"

"I felt that your manner must have been caused by something that had happened at Dar El Manzar and tried to think what it could have been. I've told you one thing I've thought of. Not the true one! Another reason came into my mind was that you both had been talking me over at dinner and that something must have been said, of course by Madame de Pleunier, which had changed your view of me, of my character, and made you think you had been mistaken in me and so produced this odd coldness—it seemed like coldness—to me."

"Anything else?"

"There was one other thing. But I simply can't speak about that. I believe it was a purely morbid imagination on my part."

"Then I won't press you. In answer to what you said so frankly I cannot say much. I wish I could. But it's impossible. Madame de Pleunier and I *did* talk about you. I don't say you would have enjoyed hearing what was said. Probably not. But I can say that I said nothing a good friend might not have said, nothing that, if you had heard it, you could have objected to or have condemned me for saying. I can also tell you that the conversation was not started by me. And"—he seemed to hesitate for a moment, then made up his mind and went on—"and I can tell you that Madame de Pleunier likes you"—another pause, and another decision—"likes you very much indeed."

"But then why should you have been as you were last night?"

"I think it was my consciousness of the discussion at Dar El Manzar. I think it was my desire to tell you about it and my conviction that I couldn't do that. The impossibility of being sincere and open with you stiffened me—even physically. I seemed cold because I felt warm and was unable to show it. I seemed unfriendly because I had never felt more your friend. That's all I can say. We are mysteries, and my mystery took full possession of me last night."

"I believe you," Noel said warmly. "I am sure your reason for not

telling me any more about what happened at Dar El Manzar last night is an excellent one. You have relieved my mind. I feel happier now. I felt I couldn't say good-bye to you without speaking out, though it was very difficult. It's all right now. And I can go back to Sidi Bou Saïd without the horrid feeling that I have lost a good friend! I shall look out to sea to-night from my garden and watch the lights of your ship go by on the way to France and send all my good wishes with it. I shall surely be back in time for that, shan't I?"

"Yes. We take ages in getting out of the bitter lakes. You can be there. And I'll think of it as we pass by the Cap. I'll look up and wish all good to you."

Then the subject was dropped.

In the dead of the night, as he had promised, Noel stood at the edge of the cliff looking over the sea and after long waiting saw at last the lights of a steamer gliding slowly out on the Mediterranean. They moved on, diminished, and presently disappeared. With a sigh he turned away, went back to the empty house, and locked himself in.

What was it that had happened in Dar El Manzar? What could Madame de Pleunier have said?

In spite of, or perhaps partly because of, Sabatier's assertion that Madame de Pleunier liked him, even liked him very much, Noel's latent uneasiness about her, her character, her feelings, her intentions, her under-reason for coming to Sidi Bou Saïd, was increased by their conversation at the restaurant in Tunis. Noel was not certain of the exact reason for that increase, but he was keenly aware of it. Something definitely unusual must have happened at Dar El Manzar between Madame de Pleunier and Sabatier to account for Sabatier's embarrassment—for it was nothing less—with Noel on his return from the dinner. Sabatier was not a man to be easily embarrassed by anything. Noel was convinced of that after considerable knowledge of him. His long and hardy life as a soldier in Africa, his varied acquaintance with all sorts of men, and perhaps many experiences with women—Noel suspected but did not know of them—had taught him a very complete self-possession. And Noel believed that he had been born with an audacious character which had prevented him from taking colour from others like a human chameleon. He was essentially individual and not easily influenced by opinion. Yet his conversation that night with Madame de Pleunier had had certainly a very strong effect on him, and Sabatier had told Noel that probably he would not have enjoyed hearing what had been said.

An enigma. And Noel had no key to it.

What were the relations between Madame de Pleunier and him going to be like after what had happened? He felt strongly inclined to act with Madame de Pleunier as he had acted with Sabatier, to match that frankness with another similar frankness. But if he did so would the result be happy?

Unable to sleep on the night of Sabatier's departure, in the early morning, but before the light of dawn filtered into his bedroom, Noel got up and went to the box room. In it his luggage was stored. Among it was the trunk containing his clerical outfit. He had brought with him the key; he bent down and unlocked the trunk. There lay the black trousers, the two black waistcoats, one of cloth, the other of black silk, the long black

coat, and the soft black hat, sometimes called by the irreverent 'a black pudding.' The light of his candle flickered over them. What if one evening, when he was once more invited to dine at Dar El Manzar, he went there in those clothes and wearing a jam-pot collar?

That would be speaking, wouldn't it? That would be telling a bit of truth, and in return he might ask for a bit of plain truth from her.

He stood for a long while staring into the trunk. When at last he locked it and went back to bed the cocks in the white village were beginning to crow.

The next day was one of his bathing days. He was glad of that. Perhaps contact with the sea would smooth out the creases in his mind. He would miss the company of Sabatier, but his solitude there at the edge of the murmuring sea, with only a few African fishermen casting their nets in the distance, would give him the chance to think something out, to come, perhaps, to some definite decision about himself and Madame de Pleunier. Nevertheless, he came back at night to his lonely house, still uncertain what to do.

A letter was waiting for him, brought by Hassan while he was out.

DEAR FRIEND,

*How are you getting on without your friend, that strange being, Captain Sabatier? Not too badly, I hope. You were probably very much surprised by my démarche with regard to him. I didn't want to see him, as you know. And I didn't mean to see him. But when I knew he must be with you in Sidi Bou Saïd and must know that I was next door, I had an uneasy conscience. I fought with it till the day which I guessed must be his last but one with you. (I knew when the boat for France sailed.) And then I gave in to my conscience. Captain Sabatier is such an old friend of mine and my husband's that I felt perhaps I ought to see him. And so I sent him that invitation. And I am not sorry I did. For we had a very pleasant evening together, and I received his forgiveness for my first stupid intention not to see him. And so all was well. Do invite yourself to another dinner at Dar El Manzar when you feel inclined for it. My intuition tells me you like to feel yourself free, and I don't want you to say to yourself, 'Oh lord! There's that woman again!' So I leave it to you to come when you are in a sociable mood. I am always here and am always here quite alone.*

*Yours as before,*

A. DE PLEUNIER.

'That strange being, Captain Sabatier.' What did she mean by that? What had prompted her to write that? From all the rest of her letter that sentence seemed to Noel to stick out: aggressively almost. It was not put in by chance, but with mature deliberation. And for a reason. To Noel it seemed to be a sort of backhand stroke at Sabatier, intended not, perhaps, to belittle him in his friend's eyes, but to insinuate that Sabatier was an odd sort of fellow, what the English sometimes call a 'queer fish,' a man one mustn't expect to understand and rely on too easily. It was not, perhaps, a sneer. No. But it surely had a sort of affinity with a sneer. And Noel felt he resented it.

Yet Sabatier was an unusual man. He belonged to no type, seemed to

stand quite alone. So perhaps Madame de Pleunier . . . Again Noel was beginning to go against a first impression concerning her, concerning something she had done.

It was nice of her to leave him 'quite free, not to insist. No definite invitation. Just the suggestion that his company would be welcome when he offered it.

And suppose he didn't offer it? Suppose he didn't invite himself to dinner? What then? What would she do? Or would she do nothing? That would be a test—not to invite himself.

Why was he always now wanting to apply tests to Madame de Pleunier?

He didn't believe in what she wrote in the middle part of her letter, the part that began with the words, 'But when I knew,' the part about the uneasy conscience. He doubted whether she had a conscience that was often uneasy.

'An old friend of mine and my husband's.' The last three words of that sentence had not been necessary. But they had been put in and, again, with intention. The friendship had to include the husband, the Commandant. Had it been a friendship or something more? Noel strongly suspected the latter, though he had very little to go on. He just felt that there was something between Madame de Pleunier and Sabatier that did not belong to friendship: a mere memory perhaps, now of something dead, something that had petered out long ago.

'And so all was well.'

'But not for me!' Noel said to himself, remembering that they had had a discussion about him which probably he would not have liked to hear and which Sabatier couldn't repeat to him.

He folded up the letter. He needn't look at it again. He knew it almost by heart.

And now what was he going to do about it?

Nothing that day. He must have the day to himself. And perhaps—he wasn't sure—he would apply that test. She left it to him to come when he was in a sociable mood. He wasn't in a sociable mood just now. He would take her at her word. If she had really meant what she had written she couldn't complain or think him rude if he did that. She would have no right to.

But though he would have the day to himself he felt that he couldn't spend it in Sidi Bou Saïd. The white village on the hill above the plain of Ariana was no longer a refuge to which he had come as a wounded man, vaguely hoping some day to get back the peace he had lost, though that seemed impossible. He began to long to escape from it. Suddenly he had a desire that was almost fierce—to be let alone.

'Why can't they leave me alone?' he said to himself without specifying who 'they' were, though Madame de Pleunier was certainly included among them. 'All I want is to have a little peace.'

It wasn't true, but he thought it was at that moment.

He summoned Bakouch.

"I shan't want any lunch. Tell Grazia. I'm going to Tunis by the train and shall be out all day. I may be back rather late. No need to prepare dinner. If I'm not back by ten lock up the house."

"Where you sleep, moosoo?"

"I may possibly sleep the night in Tunis. Tell Grazia."

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

Noel had only thought of that while he was speaking to Bakouch. To get away! To be free from any concentration of another upon him! He wanted that, angrily almost. And he went to his bedroom. He had a little light case there which held shaving and toilet materials. He would take that with him. Then, if he chose, he could stay away for the night. Now that Sabatier had gone and Madame de Pleunier had not gone, Sir Tom's house had lost its attraction for him. In it he felt both lonely and persecuted.

Yes; it had suddenly come to that. The mood would soon pass, no doubt, but it came to him like a driving force.

He picked up the little case, took his sun helmet, and hurried out of the house.

Late afternoon found Noel sitting alone on a marble bench in the Kouba du Belvédère. He had spent all the morning after his arrival in Tunis in the souks and had taken a room for the night at the Hôtel de France. Already, in Tunis, he had felt a sense of freedom, of escape, which had not been his in Sidi Bou Saïd. It almost frightened him, this longing to get away and to be quite alone. He would have to dominate it. He must go back on the morrow to Sidi Bou Saïd and he must meet again Madame de Pleunier.

After what had happened, what Sabatier had, perhaps reluctantly, revealed to him, he did not know how he was going to meet her. He was, and he knew it, by no means a good actor, not nearly so good as he believed her to be as an actress. Still he would have to try to act and act well. Otherwise she would certainly suspect that something had happened between him and Sabatier and that it had to do with Sabatier's meeting with her in Dar El Manzar. He had come in the evening to the Kouba to be quite alone and to think things carefully over and decide what to do, how to be. Before reaching the Kouba he had wandered a long while through the park of the Belvédère.

Although it was such a fine park and so near to the city, few people came to it. The inhabitants of Tunis seemed to shun it and to prefer keeping together in crowds in the avenue of ficus trees, where they could meet, see each other, and gossip. A few children came with their nurses; a very few lovers; now and then some unsociable Tunisian men, who rested as if half asleep on the benches by the bushes and trees, mechanically smoking cigarettes. In the Kouba there was no one except the guardian, who sat in a corner and took no notice of Noel.

Noel had become very fond of this place. The Kouba was small but exquisitely proportioned. On three sides it was open to the air and the great view over the plain of Ariana, the pale pastel-like beauty of the bitter lakes, the mystical mountains beyond. With its little white cupola, its slender columns of marble, its jewelled faïence, its pavement and benches of marble, there was something almost immaterial about it, a virginal purity and delicacy which enchanted him and even seemed to have a cleansing effect on him. In the distance lay Tunis la Blanche, its voices, the call of the muezzin, the cries of the street vendors, the melancholy beat of the tom-toms, the wandering melodies of flute and of rebec unheard. Nature, as if in a dream, stretched away and afar, beyond and beneath, touched with

the magic of the African evening, the light, as it failed, drenching the landscape with ineffable beauty and dying away with reluctance, asserting to the last its claim to the working of miracles.

Noel stayed till the darkness fell, troubled in the midst of the beauty, the problem within him fighting against it.

When he got back to Sidi Bou Saïd what was he going to do ?

In the afternoon of the following day when he reached home there was no letter waiting for him, but he was informed by Bakouch that Hassan had called on the previous evening, had enquired for him, and had been told that he was away in Tunis.

"What did Hassan say when he came ?"

"*Il demande pour moosoo.*"

"*C'est tout ?*"

"*Oui.*"

"Did you tell Hassan when I should be back ?"

"I said perhaps to-day."

"That all ?"

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

Noel thought things over and decided to do nothing. He would wait for the next move from Madame de Pleunier, and when it came he would make a return move he had thought of.

In the evening after dinner, when Bakouch was about to leave for the night, he said in his soft, almost drowsy voice and with his usual air of languid indifference that Hassan had been again.

"When ?" Noel asked urgently.

"When moosoo eatin."

"Did he leave a note ?"

"No, moosoo."

"Why did he come ?"

"Askin if moosoo come back."

"And of course you said I had ?"

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

Bakouch waited for a moment, then, as Noel said nothing more, he murmured, "*Bonne nuit, moosoo,*" and sauntered away, leaving Noel with the impression that there was restlessness at Dar El Manzar.

He shut up the house and went up to his room half expecting, late though it was, presently to hear a sharp knock on the front door and to find Hassan there with a note. But midnight struck and the deep silence was unbroken. Hassan wouldn't come now. Noel thought he was glad. But with that sensation there mingled the slightly confused feeling that comes from keen expectation deceived. He went to bed wondering whether he would have the pluck to make the move he had thought of since Sabatier had gone. He might do nothing, take no notice of Madame de Pleunier, neither write nor call at Dar El Manzar. As an excuse for such neglect he had one weapon. If there were ever an explanation between them, and surely there would be, he would pretend to have been upset by her inviting his guest to dine with her on their last night together in Sidi Bou Saïd and leaving him out. What would be her reaction to that ? Why should he be merely passive and leave all the action to her ? It was surely time for him to stand up to her. And he went to sleep thinking he would do it. If

she did nothing he would do nothing, let the situation remain stagnant. But if she wrote, perhaps to upbraid him for being unfriendly, he would play that card of having been hurt and offended.

On the following day nothing happened that applied to his special problem, but something unusual happened in the realm of Nature.

He came down to breakfast and found a sky muffled in grey. The morning was deadly still with a curious new heaviness in the air that weighed on the spirit, and the heat seemed leaden. It was as if Nature were frowning and waiting for something in a mood of brooding acceptance.

When Bakouch arrived with the breakfast tray he seemed to move more languidly than usual.

Noel had not slept well, and he had not much appetite. The weather was against appetite. But he sat down at the table while Bakouch, as usual, poured out his first cup of coffee.

"*Pas de soleil !*" he observed to Bakouch.

"*Non, moosoo ! Pas de soleil !*"

"It's surely not going to rain," said Noel, always in French. "There's no feeling of rain in the air."

"*Non, moosoo, no rain.*"

"I almost wish it would rain for once."

Bakouch slowly shook his large head till the tassel trembled on his tarboosh.

"No rain to-day ! Somethin else comin."

"What else ?" asked Noel.

"Wind from the desert—south wind. Very hot wind. Khamseen."

"But there isn't a breath of wind."

"*Non, moosoo !*"

And Bakouch strolled away, his bright yellow slippers deserting his heels for an instant at every step he took.

Noel felt violently irritated. He didn't know why. Apparently he was in a mood to be irritated. But Bakouch, with his languor, his imperturbable sluggishness, really was irritating. In comparison with him Taha had been like quicksilver. Still Noel emphatically didn't want Taha here with his eyes that rummaged about in you. And Bakouch knew nothing. Oh—except what Hassan no doubt had told him ! But at any rate he always looked as if he knew nothing. And he wasn't interested. Nothing on earth seemed to interest him.

Noel didn't believe in that wind Bakouch had spoken of. It seemed to him that this was the most utterly windless day that there could have been since the dawn of creation. The sea must look like a sheet of lead under that leaden-grey sky.

He went to the cliff edge to see if he were right in his supposition. He was right. For below stretched waveless lead-coloured water melting at the horizon into what seemed the downward embrace of the lead-coloured sky. As he gazed at it he felt a great melancholy, mingled with apprehension, sweep over him. The silence, the stillness, had something alarming in them. Yet he could not apprehend wind. There was absolutely nothing to suggest the coming of wind.

Probably Bakouch was mistaken. He had spoken with a sort of languid authority, as of a lazy god making a statement which had to be accepted by a poor ignorant mortal. When Noel had suggested the possibility of



rain by alluding to its improbability he had merely raised his crescent-shaped eyebrows, as if in faint surprise at such ignorance. But the ignorance might be his. Noel did not believe in the imminent coming of wind.

The sluggish morning crept slowly by till the lunch hour came. Still Noel had no appetite. However, he sat down at the table in the garden and forced himself to eat something. How was he going to spend the afternoon? It was a bathing day, but he felt he could not go to the *plage* to bathe in a sea of lead. The carriage would come as usual, but he would dismiss it.

"Where's the wind?" he said to Bakouch with a touch of irony.

"Wind not now. Comin presently," was the calm reply.

"To-day?"

"Perhaps to-day, perhaps to-morrow."

"I don't believe it," said Noel.

To this Bakouch deigned no reply. He looked as if he had not even heard the remark. Evidently he was not a man who thought it worth while to combat crass ignorance. Somehow this impressed Noel, who began to think that perhaps Bakouch really did know what was coming. He had been born and had always lived in Africa. He might be weather-wise.

After lunch Noel did not go upstairs to have a siesta. He felt too restless for that and stayed in the garden. He lit his pipe. One must do something. No prospect of anything lay before him as he would not go to the *plage*. He now began to understand how a completely idle and lonely man can miss the golden company of the sun. He felt terribly blank. There was nothing to anticipate. Nothing was going to happen, except perhaps the coming of wind. And even that might not happen.

He thought of Dar El Manzar and of the solitary woman who was there. Was she feeling at all as he was? What was she doing in that great, beautiful but empty house, with its wonderful halls and its patios, its galleries and its ceilings of cedarwood? Was the fountain playing to give her company? Were the gardeners singing to her their traditional love songs? She at least had space and beauty round her. He had only the little house of Sir Tom.

A longing for active work came to him. When his health was completely restored, after next winter, he must, of course, 'go back to work'!

But to what work? After what had happened how could he again take up the life of an English clergyman?

His mind—or was it his heart?—seemed to sicken within him.

Surely he would have to find something else to do. But what? He felt now as if his North African life, that new way of life, had unfitted him for everything.

He had a moment of ugly despair, the sort of moment a victim of insomnia often has in the dead of the night, when he knows there will be no more sleep for him till all the world is awake the next morning and sleeping time is over.

This everlasting leisure had not been unwelcome in the sun and the blue, but now it became intolerable.

He sat on. Presently he heard the tinkle of bells. The carriage had arrived from La Marsa. Should he go to the *plage*? He hesitated for a moment. But he thought of the *plage*, deserted, stretching away by the

leaden sea. No; that would be worse than this. And he went out, explained about the weather, paid the man, and dismissed him. But just before he drove off Noel asked him :

"Is there wind coming?"

The man nodded and pulled his enormous moustaches.

"Yes, monsieur, bad wind from the desert."

Now Noel believed. It was coming. But when?

Until evening the mortal stillness prevailed. It even seemed to Noel to deepen, almost to take on body, to become concrete. He was filled with a growing sense of physical apprehension, which seemed to him animal, such as he had heard that animals feel before the coming of some cataclysm of nature.

"I shall dine indoors to-night," he told Bakouch. "I don't like it out there."

"*Bien, moosoo.*"

They did not speak any more about the wind.

Noel dined indoors, then went up to the long narrow sitting-room. He must pass the long evening somehow. If only Sabatier were here now! But he must be already in France. Where was Madame de Pleunier sitting that night? Was she reading—or what?

He began to concern himself with the possibilities of her life.

It was really very strange, her coming over the sea to be quite alone in Dar El Manzar. Could it be possible that she had done this only for him? If so she *must* have fallen in love with him. He said that now flatly to himself. There could be no other reason. But she had never shown any sign of being in love with him. Or—had she? He thought and thought, seeking rather remembrances of looks than of actions.

More than once she had stared at his hair. He had noticed that and remembered it now. Could that rather strange, very concentrated look have signified anything more than that she admired the colour and growth of it? Noel was not in the least proud of his hair and had never been proud of it, but he supposed it was 'pretty good.' It was very thick, grew in a nice sort of way, and had glints of gold here and there in its brown. He remembered that Aziza had sometimes stroked it with her little soft hands touched with henna, the colour of joy. But surely his *hair* couldn't mean anything to a woman like Madame de Pleunier? It seemed to him to be an absolutely ridiculous supposition. He must reject it. Crazy to think of it. (He didn't understand women.) He did reject it. But there had been no other sign or suggestion, so far as he could remember, of her being strongly attracted to him in any physical way. And he knew by his own fatal experience how much the mere body has to do with any falling in love.

Madame de Pleunier had always been a bit of an enigma to him, and she remained an enigma, but . . .

He relit his pipe and was about to 'go at it' again in thought, when Bakouch opened the door and said :

"Hassan come with this, moosoo."

He held out a note.

Ah! She had written!

"Is there an answer?"

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

Noel told Bakouch to leave him alone and to come back in five minutes. Hassan must wait. Noel did not tear the envelope until Bakouch had left the room.

*Dar El Manzar,*  
[and the date]

DEAR FRIEND,

*What horrid weather, isn't it? It makes one feel quite sad; and the solitude weighs on one, as it never does in the golden days and the starry nights. Now, when shall we have that projected dinner together? I suggest to-morrow night. If you agree just send me a word by Hassan. Word of mouth will do unless you prefer to write.*

*Yours sincerely,*

A. DE P.

Not a word of anger. Not a sign of irritation. No reproach. Really she must be an unusual woman, what men sometimes call 'a good sort.' He had given her cause for anger, or at least irritation. He had, in fact, been almost rude. He had even thought she might 'drop him.' And now—this! He must at once write an answer, and it could, of course, only be an acceptance. He went to the writing table and picked up a pen.

As he began to write he suddenly thought:

"She hasn't much pride! Can't have, or——"

Then he wrote a brief acceptance, thanking her and accepting for the succeeding night.

Bakouch came back when the five minutes were over. Noel gave him the note, then, on second thought, decided to give it himself to Hassan.

"Where's Hassan?" he asked, taking the note from Bakouch's lethargic hand.

"*En bas, moosoo.*"

"I'll speak to him."

He went down and found Hassan at the foot of the staircase. The boy looked at him with eyes that gleamed in the light of the lamp that burned on a little table near the front door.

"*Bonsoir, Hassan.*"

"*Bonsoir, moosoo.*"

"Give this to Madame."

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

"Tell me, Hassan! Shall we have wind to-morrow?"

"*Oui, moosoo!* Wind from desert—from Touggourt."

He grinned as he said the last two words.

"Ah!" said Noel.

He stood for a moment. Then he said good night, and Hassan went away with the note.

This time Madame de Pleunier hadn't mentioned Sabatier as she had in her previous note written the second day after his departure. 'That strange being' had been left out. Noel wondered whether she would speak of him when they were at dinner. If she did not he would. And if she asked him why he had taken no notice of her first note he would tell her he had felt hurt by not being asked with Sabatier. He wondered how she

would react to that. He felt that somehow he must bring about a greater understanding between them. The obstinacy was still alive in him. He could not go on in this mysterious way full of semi-suspensions. He must know why she had come to Sidi Bou Saïd, what she wanted of him—if she wanted anything. (And he believed that she did.) He felt rather as he had felt in Upper Green when he had suspected that he was ill and had decided on and had put off seeing a doctor for fear of bad news and then had abruptly decided that he could not go on like that but must know the truth. He now dreaded what Madame de Pleunier might say, or show, if he succeeded in forcing her to take a line, to be frank with him. Yet he felt he must force her. He was strangely excited that night after receiving her note. And yet shouldn't it have reassured him by its casual, friendly tone, its complete avoidance of any reproach?

That avoidance began to trouble him, and her strange absence of what he thought of as 'decent pride.'

If she had been angry, if she had attacked him for his negligence and indifference, if she had even 'dropped' him, he would have understood it. But she ignored everything and merely—persisted.

She was, she must be, a very persistent woman. That was one of the chief traits in her character, he believed, persistence.

The night was mortally still. Could that storm—Bakouch, the Maltese driver, Hassan, must mean by a wind from the desert a storm, surely—could that storm really be coming? Its approach might account partly for his extraordinary feeling of combined excitement, animal apprehension, and a feverish desire to go forward violently in a certain direction. There was something not natural in this deadly grey pause of Nature. It was like the pause of something intending to spring. And he waited a long time for the spring, listening intently in his bed near the open window. But nothing happened, and just when he was resigned to insomnia he fell asleep.

He was waked up by a noise from below. It was the banging to and fro of a shutter which had been left unfastened, a wooden shutter that protected one of the dining-room windows at night. Bakouch must have been careless. But why was it banging so violently? He glanced vaguely at his watch. It was just after six o'clock. The noise from below irritated him, but he was still not wholly awake. His mind, that is, was still on the edge of sleep, not fully recalled to its normal daytime life. Then with the hard dry sound of the shutter there mingled a whining sound, not loud but softly shrill, a thin and shuddering sound. It died away, died down, rose again, and seemed to stream through the room. Then he knew; the wind had come, the wind from the south, from the desert and Touggourt.

Bakouch had been right in his prognostication. The storm was *en route*.

As the grim day wore on the force of the wind increased steadily. The sea was a smother of angry white under a pall that no longer resembled a sky. Nature was blotted out. The plain of Ariana disappeared with the bitter lakes, Tunis la Blanche, and the mountain of Zaghouan. Cardinal Lavigérie's cathedral was gone. La Goulette was no more. Imprisoned in Sir Tom's house, every window shut close, Noël was almost stifled by the fiery heat that had come with the wind from the desert. He could settle to nothing, could not smoke, could not read, could not even think clearly. A

feverish restlessness and intense irritation possessed him. He no longer 'felt himself.' Nature seemed to be altogether getting the better of him.

The morning wore slowly away. The afternoon came. He had not read a line nor written a line. He had only 'been.' Of course there was now no prospect for the evening. Although the distance from Sir Tom's house to Dar El Manzar was short, Madame de Pleunier would never expect him to come in such weather. There could be no question of that. On the previous evening he had keyed himself up to prepare for their meeting. He had resolved to be outspoken, had been determined to clear the ground between them, to make her reveal herself and come out of the shadows of social convention. He would force her to be with him as she must have been, in some degree at least, with Sabatier during the evening from which he had been excluded and at which he had been discussed. And now that possibility was knocked on the head by Nature. He felt that it was not even necessary to send Bakouch out into the storm to carry a message. He couldn't go, and she would certainly not expect him.

He envied her the beautiful prison in which she was incarcerated. So thick were the walls, so small the windows, so spacious the halls, that she would be able, probably, almost to forget the storm that shook and attacked contemptuously Sir Tom's little house on the height. She must be happier than he. Dar El Manzar was an interior in which one might live for days, for weeks even, forgetting the outside world. Another lonely evening for him. Had he really, not so long ago, thought that he yearned for complete isolation and 'peace'?

He called Bakouch and said that, as he couldn't get out to dine with Madame de Pleunier, they must prepare dinner at home for him.

"Oui, moosoo."

But at seven o'clock in the evening Bakouch came to tell him that Hassan was below.

"Hassan! In this weather! How did he get here?"

"In carriage. He bring this."

Bakouch held out a note.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

*What weather! A real specimen south wind, simoom, khamseen, sirocco, whatever you like to call it! But I have sent a harem carriage for you—and I have a suggestion to make. Adopt it or not, as you prefer. It is this. Sir Tom's house, pleasant enough in fine weather, is not adapted to prison life.*

*I know the North African climate. This storm will probably last at least three days and possibly four. In this lovely house one is scarcely aware of it. One just knows it's going on outside, but it doesn't seem to matter. I have ordered a bedroom to be got ready in case you would like to stay on after dinner for the night, or till the storm dies down. I am completely chez moi here. Marguerite lets me, wishes me, to do exactly as I like. I have carte blanche. So bring a few necessary things with you, if you feel inclined to agree to my proposition. And at any rate stay for one night. 'Dine and sleep,' as you English say. The carriage will wait for you as long as you like. Dinner is ordered for eight-fifteen.*

Yours,

A. DE P.

Noel read this, considered it, and was seized with hesitation. He was conscious of doubt, excitement, desire, a faint creeping of apprehension ; in fact, of a struggle. Sir Tom's little house, comfortable though it seemed in bright weather, was becoming abhorrent to him in this ugly storm. He longed to get away from it. He thought of the marvellous calm, the spaciousness of Dar El Manzar. A long moment ! Then he said to Bakouch :

"Tell Hassan I'll be down in a few minutes. And, Bakouch, I shall be out for dinner."

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

"And I shall spend the night at Dar El Manzar."

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

"And now I'll just pack a few things."

"*Oui, moosoo.*"

Bakouch was a yea-sayer if ever there was one.

Noel opened the suitcase in which his clerical costume was hidden. He must have a change of clothes for the evening. What if he wore that black outfit ? He looked at it, hesitated. No ; not to-night ! But perhaps—he folded up his navy-blue suit and laid it carefully over the other. Then he packed a few things : a couple of shirts, collars, a black tie to go with the navy blue, a thin dressing-gown, handkerchiefs, socks, evening shoes, toilet accessories. It was soon done, though he took his time. No hurry. Hassan could wait.

Madame de Pleunier would no doubt change her dress for dinner. She might not be ready till past eight.

At last he finished and went downstairs, carrying his luggage. Bakouch came with Hassan, who smiled a rather too-intimate and too-understanding welcome and extended a hand for the luggage. Then Noel wrapped himself up in the thick burnous of camel's hair he had brought from Touggourt, covered his head with the hood, held a large silk handkerchief over his mouth, and prepared to brave the whirling sand and the tumult without. He carried a soft hat.

What Madame de Pleunier had called a 'harem carriage' was one of those landaux, through whose narrow windows veiled women may be seen in the streets of Tunis peering at the forbidden world. It was drawn by a couple of drooping horses submitted helpless to the storm. Into this carriage Noel hurried, followed closely by Hassan.

Noel huddled into a corner. Hassan sat on the opposite seat. The windows were drawn up, and the horses, encouraged by a liberal application of the whip, moved slowly off.

Hassan kept his gleaming bright eyes fixed on Noel. After a moment Noel shut his eyes. The boy always made him feel uneasy and even hostile. Yet Hassan had not done him any harm and was not likely to. But he certainly knew all about the horrible episode with Aziza and the Maréchale. Even so his discretion, as Noel considered it, with his mistress should surely have earned him a good mark from Noel. But Noel couldn't help it. He detested the boy.

The drive to Dar El Manzar was short, but the horses went so slowly, facing the storm, that it seemed long to Noel. At last, however, they turned in under the penthouse, followed the alley between the aloes and cactus plants, and drew up in front of the colonnade. The white peacocks

were gone. The roar of the sea came up from below through the sand that was on its way to the shore of Sicily, to the south of Europe, overleaping the Mediterranean.

Hassan skipped nimbly out with the luggage. Noel followed him. The great door was instantly opened, and Noel passed in, accompanied closely by Hassan with his burden.

Rather to his surprise, for it was not yet eight o'clock, they were met by Madame de Pleunier directly they entered the patio. It seemed to Noel that she must have been waiting for them, for she was standing just inside near the outer lobby, and he saw her eyes go instantly to the suitcase, even before they turned upon him, as if the suitcase meant more to her than he did.

When she did look at him, however, she was smiling, and he saw on her face an eager, excited, even feverish expression, quite different from the very self-possessed, slightly artificial, and sometimes suddenly vague look characteristic of her.

"Ah! So you *will* stay!" she said, holding out her hand.

"As you are so very kind, and as the weather is so diabolical, I thought I would, though really——" began Noel, suddenly wishing he had not given in to her suggestion.

But she interrupted him.

"Now, no really! You *will* stay. Go with Hassan. He will show you——"

She turned away abruptly, almost as if to hide something. Her manner seemed strangely out of control. It almost startled Noel. But though there was a wonderful calm in the dimly lit patio, through which came faintly the sound of water from the fountain falling into its bed of alabaster, he could still hear the voice of the tempest outside, now not an angry, but a pervasive, voice, preventing forgetfulness of Nature's vehemence. And he thought:

'She's affected by this awful south wind as I am. Impossible to be as usual when Nature's so wild.'

And as he followed Hassan up the marble staircase to the first floor of the palace he remembered that long ago he had read stories of how sirocco affects nearly all sensitive and even many insensitive people, of the crimes set down to its influence, of the suicides caused by it, of the escapades, sometimes criminal, sometimes wildly immoral, which seemed to be induced by its fiery breath.

'The south wind has got her!' he thought.

And the uneasiness which he had been aware of for some time increased in him.

Nevertheless, when Hassan, always smiling, showed him into a long bedroom, with a blue-and-red ceiling touched with gold, yet not too ornate, and a low Arab bed with posts and drawn-back curtains of some golden stuff, before which was spread a Persian carpet, he could not be sorry he had come. He sank down on a broad divan covered with striped silk, under a tiny square window protected by a grille of wrought iron, and sighed.

What a house! How different from Sir Tom's small and ordinary abode, from any house Noel had seen or imagined till he came here! (The Bardo which he had visited and been fascinated by was full of bad taste as well as of beauty.) It was a pleasure to the senses to be in such an interior. And

he watched Hassan carefully unpacking his suitcase almost like a man in a dream.

But suddenly the boy stared, as if in amazement, and the complacent look disappeared from his face. He had lifted out Noel's clerical clothes. Noel had forgotten about them.

The startled blood rushed to his cheeks and up to the roots of his hair as the boy turned a pair of piercing and searching eyes on him. But then he immediately realized that almost certainly Hassan had never set eyes on a Protestant priest and could not, therefore, know that the clothes were a priest's uniform. Hassan had seen Father Anastase, of course, but he went about in a soutane—didn't he? At any rate he had worn one when Noel had seen him.

*"Pour ce soir ?"* said Hassan with his eyes fixed enquiringly on Noel.

*"Mais non ! Mais non !"*

And Noel got up from the divan, crossed the room quickly, and made Hassan put the black clothes back into the suitcase, which he shut.

*"These !"* he said, pointing to the navy-blue suit.

Hassan laid it out carefully on the bed. Noel took his toilet things and looked round. Thereupon Hassan opened a small door at the far end of the room and ushered him into a marble bathroom fitted with every toilet requisite. Apparently he thought Noel would perhaps like to take a bath. For he turned on two silver taps, and water gushed out.

*"Non ! Non !"* exclaimed Noel again.

Hassan turned off the taps and lingered, apparently curious as to what was going to happen next.

*"Assez !"* said Noel, pointing imperatively to the doorway.

Hassan went but turned at the door.

*"Vous marabout ?"* he asked solemnly.

*"Non, non !"* exclaimed Noel, forcing a laugh of derision.

Hassan went slowly away and out of the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

Noel quickly changed his clothes, carefully brushed his hair, washed his face and hands, examined himself in a mirror. His eyes looked excited, almost feverish. He tried to force a calm or indifferent look into them.

Then he opened the bedroom door. Hassan was standing just outside it. He felt a horrid impulse to strike the boy.

That sudden and almost overpowering inclination to strike Hassan, overcome, made Noel realize how strongly he was affected by the terrible wind from the south. As he went downstairs he made a severe resolve to be careful, to govern himself, not to yield weakly to the influence from outside. In this large and wonderful house that influence must be much less than it had been in the little house of Sir Tom. But even here it could be, and was, felt by him and, he believed, by Madame de Pleunier.

Hassan accompanied him closely down the stairs. Was the boy going to shadow him all the time he was in Dar El Manzar? Had Madame de Pleunier chosen Hassan to valet him, to be his body servant? He must protest against that, must say something about preferring to be independent and not caring for anyone to be in and out of his room.

As he came into the patio he saw that dinner was laid on the green marble table near the fountain. There were yellow roses upon it. Madame de Pleunier was waiting for him on a divan under the musicians' gallery. As



he went to join her he noticed again the unusually eager and almost feverish expression in her eyes. He had never before seen her look like this.

She was dressed in black and white and wore a rather turban-like head-dress of white, which, he thought, made her look much handsomer and more expressive than usual, bringing out the colour of her reddish-brown eyes and emphasizing the regularity of her features, which were typically French. This headdress was only a silken band, leaving all the hair on the top of her head uncovered. Her dress was not cut low. Near the top of it, on the left side, she wore a gardenia. He could not make out whether it was a real one or artificial. She had a large black-and-white fan in her hand, closed. In spite of the fountain, the large size of the lofty room, and the fact that no open window or door gave access to the burning heat that was pressing against the house from without, there seemed to Noel to be a curious and unusual warmth in the hall. He smelled incense blended with amber. But he did not see any brazier. It was carefully hidden as before.

"Were you very surprised when you got my note and knew that the carriage was waiting?" was her greeting.

"Really I was," he said, sitting down beside her.

"What had you meant to do?"

"To tell the truth, I had given up the idea of coming. It seemed quite impossible."

"It's better here than in Sir Tom's little house—don't you think?"

"Incomparably better."

"You aren't sorry you came?"

He was able to answer truthfully, "No!" though, perhaps owing to the weather, he was still filled with a curious creeping sense of uneasiness, almost amounting to apprehension. But it seemed to him perhaps physical rather than mental, an uneasiness of the body. Thinking this and wishing, if possible, to find confirmation of it, he began to speak of the action of weather on people and even on animals.

"Yes," she said, and again, "Yes, yes!"

But her voice had an absent-minded sound in it, and just then two Arabs, in white and red, wearing turbans, appeared from somewhere on the opposite side of the hall, and the first course of the dinner was ready.

"Yes, you are right!" she said, getting up. "But here's dinner!"

As they moved across the hall, passing at the back of the fountain, there seemed to come a more furious blast of wind striking against the highly placed house, exposed on its lofty terrace above the storm-tossed foam of the sea. Noel was conscious of it though it was muffled, as if the sound of it reached them from a distance. Anger, violence, trying to force its way to them.

"The elements want to drive in on us here," said Madame de Pleunier. "Fortunately they can't. I couldn't have allowed any guest to go home to-night. I gave orders that if you didn't care to sleep here you were not to come at all."

"To Hassan?" Noel could not help saying.

"Yes, To Hassan, of course," she said with apparent indifference. "Didn't he tell you?"

"No."

As before when he had dined with her, their chairs were placed side by side, facing the fountain. He sat down on her right. Then he said—he

never knew why he said it, but it seemed that he had to say it and couldn't help himself :

"Please don't let Hassan trouble about me while I'm here."

All the apparent indifference died out of Madame de Pleunier's face. She shot an intensely alive and sharp glance at him and said :

"*Trouble* about you ? What do you mean ?"

"He hung about in my room, the room you kindly gave me, just now, as if he thought he had to valet me or something."

"Why shouldn't he ?"

"I'm not accustomed to a valet. I really don't need him."

She waited for a moment, her soup-spoon in her hand. Then she said :

"Don't you like Hassan then ?"

"Oh, I scarcely know him," said Noel evasively.

"No ! But do tell me. Don't you like him ?"

"I don't—very much."

"But why ?" she said with noticeable persistence. "What's your reason ?"

"I could scarcely say I have one. But I don't trust him. Do you ?"

She smiled.

"Oh, if it comes to that, can one *trust* any of these people out here, these Arabs, these Tunisians, these African-born beings ?"

She stopped, as if considering for a moment, and then added with an irrepressible sneer :

"These Ouled Nail dancers that some European men seem to think such a lot of !"

She stopped speaking. Noel went on eating his soup and said nothing.

"Those who claim to understand these Africans make a great mistake. But they are usually men. We European women have sharper wits."

Again she stopped speaking, and Noel felt obliged to say something, though the subject had become intensely disagreeable to him.

"Then *you* don't trust Hassan either ?" he said, but trying to take a light tone.

"As regards myself, I do. He owes everything to me. He's been with me since he was a mere child. I picked him up for his looks. He looked well about the house. And he's as sharp as a needle."

"So I should think."

"He has a sort of *culte* for me, I believe. But that's all I should care to say for him."

"I see," said Noel uncomfortably.

And there was a pause which he felt as awkward. It seemed to him that Madame de Pleunier had been disconcerted by what he had said about Hassan and that in her final remarks she had intended to conceal that from him. He had the distinct impression that she had been taken unawares and had said something she now wished unsaid. He ended the pause, as so many pauses are ended, by speaking about weather. Perhaps the peculiarly excited look he had noticed in her eyes, her unusually eager manner when she had welcomed him on his arrival, and his own persistent feeling of uneasiness and of having much less self-control than he generally had pushed him to this. He wondered about that afterwards.

"The worst of this sort of weather," he said, "seems to me to be the

effect it has, or seems to have, on one's mind. I'm not even sure I mean only that."

He stopped.

"Yes?" she said. "Go on!"

"It seems to affect one altogether, the whole of one somehow. I was thinking about that to-day up at Sir Tom's house."

"Were you?"

"Yes. And I remembered something I had read somewhere—I can't remember where—about weather crimes. Have you heard of them?"

"Yes, of course. There was a book published in French about them a long time ago. I read it. It is well known, for instance, that what the Italians call *sirocco* turns many people towards suicide and others to crime. And certain sorts of weather produce what we call *cafard*. Everyone who has lived much out here knows what weather can do to one."

"Do you?"

"Yes," she said, looking directly into his eyes for a moment, turned round in her seat. "But," she added, turning again to her plate, "if you want to hear tales about what African weather can do to even tough men you should talk to an officer in the Foreign Legion, say at Sidi Bel Abbès."

And she talked interestingly, and with what seemed to Noel gathering excitement, about incidents that she asserted had happened in the Foreign Legion and that had been, at any rate partially, attributed to the action of weather.

He listened with growing absorption. He had never before heard her talk so well and with such animation. She seemed laying herself out to captivate his mind by her talk and to draw him on into the depths of an African atmosphere. Usually, when with him, she had seemed to take North Africa for granted. Sometimes even she had shown apparent dislike of it and often boredom, speaking like the wife of an official who had to be there because to be there was his *métier*. And Noel, in those moments, had felt that she was being sacrificed to her husband's profession and perhaps almost hated that. But now she drew him by her talk into the fascination of Africa, sometimes ugly, sometimes dangerous, sometimes even frightful, but a fascination, nevertheless. Listening to her, he felt as if something, the weather probably, had dug spurs into her mind and forced it into a gallop.

This woman was clever, much cleverer than he had supposed. Though he had always known that in some ways, social ways, she must be very intelligent and subtle. Now she showed brain and imagination and an astounding command of language and power of concentrating interest.

"What a lot you know of this country!" he murmured when she stopped.

"I ought to! I have had enough of it!"

"But I can't make out something."

"What is it?"

"I can't make out whether you like—love it, perhaps—or hate it."

"Both—both—both!" she exclaimed, almost with violence. "There's champagne—iced! Have some!"

"Thank you."

"Both! That's always the way with what I call *tremendousness*. You hate it at moments. At other moments you have to love it. The reason

of that is the power in it. Power—force—the irresistible! Hatred and love go out to it. They always will. They have to.”

“The irresistible!” said Noel, seizing upon that word.

She was evidently struck by the sound of his voice in saying it. For again she looked into his eyes, having turned slightly in her seat.

“What made you say it like that?” she asked.

Noel had been thinking of what had happened to him in Touggourt with Aziza, of the obsession born in him there, of how even now it lingered on in him, causing him longing, regret, and suffering, in spite of the fact that his brain told him that the whole thing had been crazy and that it was crazy to dwell on it. It was over. It was done with. Away with it! But he couldn’t—he couldn’t forget it, couldn’t cut himself loose from the haunting memory of it. And with the memory there was always desire.

“I was only thinking—I was thinking that if something is *irresistible* those who are governed by it, those who yield to it, must never be condemned. That was all.”

“All! That was, that is, a great deal.”

“But surely you agree with me?”

“Whom were you thinking about?” she said.

The question startled Noel because it was so abominably apt.

“Whom!”

“Yes—whom?”

“But I was thinking generally,” he said insincerely.

“Ah! Were you?”

“I was thinking, for instance, of all you have just told me about the men of the Foreign Legion and the way their conduct is often altered, or let us say conditioned, by the climate of North Africa, what we’ve been calling *weather*. I suppose they were all punished for what they did.”

“Of course they were.”

“Well, I think they ought to have been forgiven. That’s all.”

Her face changed, became almost severe below the white turban-like band that was round her head.

“Tell that to their officers!” she said with a faint laugh.

And then immediately she added:

“That raises a very large question: the grand question of forgiveness.”

“Yes, that’s true,” said Noel uncomfortably, aware that he had been thinking of himself, of what had happened between him and Aziza, and of the heavy payment required of him for it.

She looked at him for a moment, then turned again to her glass.

“I don’t think I am a very forgiving woman,” she said.

“Aren’t you?”

“Not very. No. And you? What about you?”

“How d’you mean?”

“Could you forgive easily? Could you, for instance, forgive someone for the committal of a carefully hidden action, perhaps very detrimental to you, if you found it out unexpectedly or if it was revealed to you?”

There seemed to be a strong pressure in her voice as she asked that question, speaking slowly, like one following a train of thought that was important to her. He felt that she was strongly interested to know what his answer would be.

He thought of what the Maréchale and Aziza had done to him, of how

they had tricked him, and in what a peculiarly abominable way, causing him to be the artificer of his own tragedy.

"Some things are not easy to forgive," he almost muttered.

"Then you feel that there are things you could never forgive? Is that it?"

Instead of answering her he said:

"But you! What about *you*? Are there things that *you* could never forgive?"

"Yes," she said in a voice that had suddenly become profound.

There was a silence. Then she added:

"Perhaps I'll tell you one—later on—in the night."

"Please do, if you can."

"When we *can't* forgive we are ruled by the irresistible, by something within us that is stronger than our conscience, or our will, or than anything else."

"But is that power which you speak of as in us really ungovernable ever?"

"I leave you to judge of that for yourself."

She waited for an instant and then added:

"As I shall judge for myself, as I have always judged. We are often said not to know ourselves. But I am quite certain that I know *myself*, at any rate better than I know anyone else. Don't you feel the same about yourself?"

After an instant of hesitation he answered:

"I *believe* I do. But I expect you are much cleverer about people than I am. I don't think myself at all clever about people."

At this point in their talk with great abruptness Madame de Pleunier gave it a new turn wilfully.

"We mustn't spoil our enjoyment of this very good dinner—Marguerite left me an excellent native cook, though when she is here she brings a French chef with her—by being too earnest and psychological," she said. "In Paris someone would have halted us several remarks back by some *boutade* or some devastating *bon mot*. A little later on in the night, as you are staying, we can be earnest again."

(She made a perceptible pause before the word 'earnest'.)

"When I was speaking just now about the effect of weather upon men I said that if you wanted to hear tales about that you should talk to an officer in our Foreign Legion."

"Yes."

"But you know somebody who would do almost as well."

"Whom?" said Noel, though he was sure that he knew.

It must be either Sabatier or Bernard.

"Captain Sabatier. He is a mine of knowledge about all North Africa."

So at last his name was mentioned between them, and by her! Noel had been wondering whether they would ever speak of him again. For he had not made the attack upon Madame de Pleunier that he had thought of and now felt sure he would never make it.

"I wish I had," he said. "Why did you, in your note to me, call him 'that strange being,' Captain Sabatier?"

"Because he is strange. For instance, he is much stranger than my husband is and much stranger than you are."

Noel flushed, though he had certainly never thought of himself as strange.

"Yes, I should think so," he said rather stiffly.

"He is strange because Africa has not only influenced him; it has *overlaid* him. He thinks neither as a true Frenchman thinks—my husband, for instance, in his *sane* moments—nor as any African thinks. In consequence his mental processes are obscure, unexpected, and almost impossible to understand. I gave them up long ago."

He detected bitterness in her last words.

"All the same I like Sabatier very much," he said, on the defensive.

"So do I, in a reasonable way."

She glanced at him.

"Were you very surprised when that letter came asking him to dine?"

"I must say I was—very."

"You thought me a very inconsistent woman?"

"I did. Forgive me!"

"I think all women are inconsistent. But there you have it! I like Sabatier. And one of the reasons, perhaps the chief reason, why I like him is that I can say to him things I could scarcely say to anyone else. Perhaps even to no one else. It may be the African overlay in him. I really meant not to see him, as I told you. That was not a pretence. But when I knew he was actually here, only a few yards, as it were, away from me, I felt that I was being absurd and that, as he was such an old friend, I ought to see him."

Noel felt now, as he had felt before, that she had had a special reason, concealed, for seeing Sabatier and that it must have had something to do with him.

"But you seemed to be angry about his coming when I told you," he said.

"I was. I didn't want him to come. I didn't want anyone."

She didn't explain why, and Noel didn't like to press her with questions, so he said nothing. Besides, he thought that if he asked any she would merely repeat all the nonsense about her mourning and needing 'isolation' because of the death of her father. He didn't believe in that now. Had he ever believed in it?

"Perhaps I will tell you why later on," she said after waiting for a moment. "We have plenty of time. This storm will probably last for at least three days."

"But I can't stay as long as that," said Noel. "I just brought things for the one night, as you so kindly——"

"*Things!* But what more do you want? You have that nice dark blue suit. I suppose you brought a razor?"

"Oh, yes."

"And something for the night?"

"Yes, of course."

"There are brushes and everything else in the bathroom. Didn't Hassan show you?"

"Oh, yes, he did."

"Well, then, what more do you want? Really"—she smiled, but her eyes looked excited and determined too—"I shan't let you go unless the

wind goes. Hark at it ! It is increasing as night comes on. Sir Tom's house would be unbearable. Can't you be happy here ?"

Following a gesture she made, Noel looked round the patio, at the fountain, the marbles of various colours, the Persian carpets, the exquisite plasterwork, the carved cedarwood, the divans covered with silks of delicate hues, looked and thought of the house of Sir Tom.

It was better here, much better. But something in her eyes made him think of it as a beautiful prison.

Perhaps she realized the thought that passed through his mind, for her expression completely changed, the determined look died out of her eyes, and before he could answer she added :

"Keep me company just till the storm dies down—won't you ? Just now I am really a very lonely woman."

"Of course I will !" he said.

But then he couldn't help adding :

"But I thought you wished to be lonely. You said so."

"Ah, no ! I may have said, or written, that I wanted to be alone. But no woman wants to be lonely. *No woman*. Believe me ! And now try this ice pudding. These native cooks are very clever when it comes to cold things. And then we'll go and sit where we sat the first time you called on me here, near the brazier."

"Where is the brazier ?"

"You mustn't know. That would spoil the effect. Think of the perfume as an atmosphere, as I do."

"Smoke your pipe !" she said later on when they were sitting on the divan and the coffee table had been taken away by one of the Arabs. "I know you are a man who likes a pipe."

"But I haven't got it here !"

"You left it behind you !"

"No. But it's in my bedroom."

"Hassan shall fetch it !"

She clapped her hands loudly, almost with violence, he thought. After a moment Hassan appeared from some hidden place, running lightly. She spoke to him quickly in Arabic. Noel was going to explain where he had put his pipe, but she didn't give him time.

"He will find it," she said as Hassan softly ran towards the staircase and seemed to glide up it. "He can find anything."

"And find out anything, too, I believe !" Noel couldn't help saying.

"He's not such a bad boy as you think. He's only—African. One needs such people out here. He is always begging me to take him to Paris. But I never shall. The vices of Paris grafted upon the vices of Africa would make a combination that I should scarcely care to have to tackle in intimacy. So Hassan remains in Africa. Here he comes already with your pipe ! *And* matches. He forgets nothing."

Hassan stood by till the pipe was lit. Then Madame de Pleunier spoke to him again, and he disappeared. Very soon a woman Noel had never seen before came walking demurely towards them. Madame de Pleunier did not allow her to reach the divan but got up and went to her by the fountain. They stood together only for a moment. Then the woman turned and went away. She was tall, thin, with a long pale face that Noel

thought looked impenetrable and severe. Evidently she must be a servant, or perhaps a paid companion.

"That's my French maid," Madame de Pleunier said, coming back. "She was with me in Touggourt. Did you ever see her?"

"Never."

"She's a rather odd mixture. Very devout but also very wide-minded. Nothing shocks her, and yet she believes that quite a good many people will go to hell because of their sins. She thinks that quite as it should be."

"And does *she* never sin?"

"She may. But if so she never makes it a subject of conversation."

"She's a wise woman."

Noel wondered why Madame de Pleunier had sent for her. He knew later on.

Usually he found the influence of a pipe soothing and smoked slowly. But not so that night. A nervous rider makes his horse nervous; an excited rider turns a well-trained horse very quickly into a difficult horse. Noel had come to know that in the Sahara, among other things. He thought of it that night in connection with Madame de Pleunier. There was something in her, something febrile, something uneasy, striving for an outlet but so far suppressed, that communicated itself to him and took from him all sense of ease. It seemed strangely to be combined with the storm outside. Stormy without, stormy within, in spite of the apparent spacious calm that was about them and the fragile fall of the water into its bed of alabaster. For a time that seemed to Noel long, she kept the conversation going on topics neither intimate nor remote, safe topics that she might have talked about to anyone who had been educated and knew something of life as she knew it. And all the time she was 'making' conversation; and all the time her mind was really occupied with other things; and all the time she was secretly waiting till a moment came, thought of, perhaps, by her as propitious; and all the time Noel felt it, and felt, too, as if she might be waiting for a cue from him.

But he did not know how to give it. And he was not at all sure that he wanted to give it.

At last Hassan came to them with a tray holding a jug of orangeade, glasses, and a bucket of ice. He placed it on one of the low tables that were scattered about in the hall, lifted his thin arms, crossed them, placed his two palms gently against his shoulders, bowed solemnly, and went away.

Noel immediately had the feeling that the household was free from service for the night and that Madame de Pleunier and he would not be disturbed again.

She watched Hassan go, and as soon as he had disappeared in the marble distance, she said, with a curious decisiveness like one now setting out to do what for some time she had resolved upon:

"You remember at dinner when we talked about forgiveness you asked me whether there were things I felt I could never forgive?"

"Yes, I remember."

"And I said yes. And then I said that perhaps I would tell you one later."

"I remember that too."

"I might tell it to you now."

"Yes?"



She seemed to hesitate, then she said :

"I think I will. It may explain—perhaps it will explain one or two things in me that you may have noticed, that I know you have noticed, and possibly wondered about. Mind ! I don't want you to acknowledge that. No ! So don't bother about it. But I should like you to understand me a little better than you do. Yes."

All the time she was saying this she looked at him with a sort of almost stern enquiry, as if she were deeply considering how he would receive what she was thinking of telling him, what she was almost resolved upon telling him. And he felt that she might be almost afraid of him if—what ? He did not know. He only felt that in her there was perhaps a possibility of fear and fear of him. This surprised him very much. He could not understand it. But he did not dislike it. Perhaps because it gave him an entirely unaccustomed sense of power.

"Then please do tell me !" he said.

She poured out some orangeade, put some ice into it, and said :

"That's for you !"

"Oh, thank you."

"And I will have some too. This terrible storm from the south parches everything. It will go on for days. What Touggourt must be now !"

She put her lips to the glass into which she had just poured some orangeade for herself. He heard the ice in it tinkle.

"You never saw a sandstorm in Touggourt."

"No. I was lucky."

When would she come to it ? He felt that possibly even now he might prevent a revelation, which mysteriously he began to fear, by bringing up some new subject of conversation and so letting her know, without words, that perhaps it would be better if she avoided it. But before he found anything more to say she came to a decision and continued :

"I have told you I both love and hate North Africa. I feel its fascination but I have some reason to hate it. You haven't read very much French, have you ?"

"No, not very much."

"But probably you have read enough to know that in our fiction there is one eternal subject that French authors seem never to weary of, the everlasting trio, husband, wife, and mistress, or husband, wife, and lover."

"It does seem so."

"English people seem to think that a French wife—I'm speaking of my sort of class, not of the working classes now—fully expects her husband to have a mistress and doesn't mind it at all. We're not all quite like that ! But another thing ! Even a French wife's readiness to accept the eternal triangle with equanimity may depend on what *kind* of mistress her husband indulges in. I married very young. And I happened to marry for love. Many Frenchwomen don't. But I did. Have you ever wondered about the relations of my husband and myself ?"

Noel felt that he reddened.

"I see you have. And have you been surprised by my loathing of the Ouled Nail women ? Yes, you have ! My husband, when I married him, was a dashing young soldier, young still, though considerably older than I. His love of adventure had led him to join our army in Africa. I had never seen Africa. I was purely a product of La Belle France and as innocent as

you like. The *Africanness*, to coin a word, of my husband fascinated me *then*. I didn't know what North Africa can do to a Frenchman. I didn't know, hadn't the least idea, of its influence upon some natures. Not on all, but on many. My husband—you wouldn't think it now, because long years of the desert have dried him up!—was one of the impressionable class. And he had a marked taste for *colour*. Do you understand what I mean by that?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know it for quite a long time and was happy. We were stationed in various places in Algeria. We spent much time at Algiers. I didn't give him a child. We needn't go into that. But he wasn't a man who had a yearning for fatherhood. And he was genuinely devoted to his profession. He is a first-class soldier and could never have been anything else but a soldier. He was born to be that. Purely the military type, but no fool in other ways either. I'm by nature sporting, was brought up in the saddle, and so on. In many ways we suited each other. And I went on being in love with him. Presently we were transferred to Constantine. We were there for a considerable time. Then we went south, to Biskra, and he joined the garrison there."

She stopped for a moment and then said :

"I'd better tell you something now. I have a native hatred for *colour*. I don't mean in every way. I mean in the purely physical sense. I don't defend it. I don't pride myself on it. It would be ridiculous of me, I dare say, to try to justify it. But it's *there*, in me. I can see that men of colour may be splendid-looking fellows. Often they are extremely handsome. Often they look like born aristocrats. But it is inconceivable to me that I could ever be *physically* attracted by one of them. He might be a coloured Adonis. That would mean nothing to me—physically. Do you understand how one can admire without the slightest physical desire being mingled with the admiration?"

"I dare say. I dare say!" murmured Noel, feeling almost as if he were being crucified with words, but thanking whatever gods there be that she didn't know about him and Aziza.

"Having this native hatred for colour in the physical sense, I came to live among a coloured race, or, if you like, among coloured races. And I always treated those of them whom I came in contact with decently and kindly. But I never thought of them in *that* way."

An expressive gesture and a grimace explained fully her last sentence.

"No! But *others* did! And presently I found this out. As everyone who comes to North Africa is, I was taken to see the Ouled Nail women. They seemed to me monsters: painted monsters, with their piles of false hair, their chimney-sweep eyes, their henna-dyed hands, their dripping gold coins earned by vice. I couldn't even understand how men of colour could be attracted by them. Much less could I conceive it possible that any man of my own race could follow after them. Imagine my feelings when eventually I found out that my own husband had secretly taken one as his mistress.

"I needn't go into details about this. It happened a long time ago and changed entirely not only my relations with him and my feeling for him, but, as it has sometimes seemed to me since, and even seems to me now, my whole nature. (That won't interest you. Why should it?)"

"You do interest me—very much," said Noel, but in a low, almost faltering voice, seared by her ignorance of him and of what had happened to him.

"Really! Do I?" she said with an accent of, he thought, incredulity and giving him, as she spoke, a suddenly piercing glance. "Then you don't condemn me for that?"

"How could I condemn you when you loved your husband?"

"But that's not what I mean."

"I don't understand."

"It was that he should prefer an *Ouled Nail* woman to me!"

"Oh—yes!"

"Any woman would have been a tragedy for me. But this was more than a tragedy. It was an abominable humiliation. Don't you see?"

"Oh, yes—yes, I understand now!"

"I might possibly have been able eventually, after the first shock was over, to forgive him for having fallen in love with, say, a fascinating French girl. Men are like that. Don't I know it? But one of those *Ouled Nails*!"

The scorn with which she said that was beyond any scorn Noel had ever conceived of. It was fierce. It almost seemed to scorch him like a flame. After a moment of silence she continued:

"It happened when I was away from North Africa in Paris."

"Ah! But—but didn't that perhaps make it more understandable?"

"You are trying to excuse it, I see!"

"I only meant that——"

"I know what you meant. Don't explain. I know. But it continued after I came back. Soon after I arrived from France, though I knew nothing, I had the feeling that my husband wasn't glad to have me back. He tried to seem just as usual, to behave as usual, but he's a soldier; he's not a good actor. And a woman who really cares for a man is hideously intuitive about him. In my opinion a *woman's* love is *not* blind. Far from it. It's just the contrary. Love makes her sight keen—keen! Ah, if men knew how keen they might well be afraid of it! My *husband* knows that now if no other man in the world does. And why wasn't I welcome? Not because on account of my absence in France my husband, in this North African climate, had felt that he needed a substitute and had found none handy but this creature. No. He had actually found her more to his liking than I was. I was a white woman and she was not. And he preferred her to me and went on preferring her. Since then I have detested the *Ouled Nails*. Can you wonder at that?"

The excitement Noel had noticed in her eyes when he arrived at Dar El Manzar was now matched by the excitement of her manner and seemed to him to have some strange and subtle connection with the sandstorm raging outside. He felt that if the storm had not come to them perhaps she would never have told him all this, and he knew that he, too, was strongly affected by the storm, which acted as an intense irritant on his whole nervous system and filled him with a sensation of febrile intensity. There is something personal in a storm which comes from the desert. It has a fierce personality that is shared by no other storm and an irritating whipping effect, peculiar to it, which few nerves can resist.

"No, no!" he said hastily, uneasily, almost guiltily. "I suppose it's quite natural."

"And forgiveable?"

"Surely, surely! But—but you didn't leave your husband?"

"No. I didn't go away from him, except in mind and soul and nature. That's nothing, of course, since as a body I remained with him, though not in the true way of a wife. You understand?"

"Yes."

"I was *there*. And I am *there* still, as you know. For you've seen us together in Touggourt. But few people can be farther apart from each other than he and I. For the sake of his career, such as it is, and the *convenances*, I made no public scandal at all. Of my intimate friends, only two know the exact truth of this matter, Marguerite de Varenne and Captain Sabatier."

"Sabatier knows?"

"You are surprised at that?"

She watched him narrowly as she said that.

Was Noel really surprised? He had sounded as if he were. But when she asked him the question he put to himself that other question. He had always felt that there was some hidden link between her and Sabatier, some understanding, some mutual knowledge, some memory that made for intimacy unshared by others. But was it only that or was there something more? And why should Sabatier know what had apparently been kept carefully hidden from others?

"You are not surprised!"

How terribly quick she was! Or how terribly transparent he must be!

"I—don't know. I have felt that——" he stopped.

He was afraid of saying too much.

"What have you felt?"

"I felt you were—were great friends with Sabatier."

"Sabatier knows because he has the same tastes as my husband."

This revelation came upon Noel with the force of a shock. He had not expected that.

"Sabatier, too, likes colour. Don't you remember I told you that Africa had not only influenced him but had *overlaid* him?"

"I do remember, but I didn't know that—— But why should he know because of that?"

"There's a brotherhood between men who have the same queer tastes. But perhaps you haven't found that out yet?"

This unexpected question pierced Noel. Could she possibly know? He had a moment of horrible trepidation. But she couldn't know or she would never have told him of this.

"I'd never thought of it," he said.

"There is a lot of things you have never thought of," she commented, and then she added in a sort of undertone:

"I could wish there were more."

Almost before he had time to wonder what she meant by that she added:

"Sabatier knew and was sorry for me."

"Although——"

"Yes—*although*! But for a very long time I didn't know that he shared

the tastes of my husband. And that, for me, was another blow. Ah, my friend, I am used to blows! That is the cause of the bitterness you have sometimes, often, perhaps, noticed in me. And it"—she spoke more slowly and earnestly, more deeply, and for a moment with less excitement—"is my excuse for it, if excuse there be. And it must be my excuse, too, for occasional actions which otherwise might seem too condemnable."

She fell into a deep silence for a moment. Noel did not venture to interrupt it. He did not understand it, but he had to respect it. There was something so sincere in it, so unself-conscious. At last, emerging from it, she said simply :

"I have been an unfortunate woman."

"Why?"

"I have liked, been attracted by, the wrong sort of men. There are women like that. I am one of them. Now you know one of my secrets. Are you shocked by it?"

"No. But I'm sorry."

"For me?"

"Yes, very."

She took his hand and pressed it, keeping her eyes fixed upon him.

"Thank you."

"And yet you still like Sabatier?" he said, leaving his hand in hers, not exactly because he wished to, but rather because he didn't wish to hurt her by withdrawing it.

"Yes. In a different way. He is half African. He can't help being as he is now. But there are others who might be rescued."

As she said this she squeezed his hand, then immediately let go of it. For the first time during the evening—or night, for now it was night and the great house seemed full of it—she opened the black-and-white fan she had with her and used it.

"How hot it is!" she said. "My maid's gone to bed. I told her not to sit up for me. All the servants have gone to bed."

As she said the last words she looked hard at him, and her eyes seemed to ask a question. He felt that she was undecided about something and distressed by this indecision and that it was connected with him. He looked away from her and said :

"I wonder if the storm affects *them*."

"Do *you* feel it strongly?" she asked.

If he had been sincere he would have answered yes, but something prompted him to be insincere, and he said in a voice that was deliberately casual and indeed almost flippant :

"No, I can't say I do. In this lovely house I seem to be getting accustomed to it. I'm sure it won't prevent me from having a glorious sleep in that delightful room upstairs. I think I shall sleep much better here than I did in Sir Tom's house last night."

"Ah!" she said. "Well, I hope so."

She shut up her fan rather sharply.

"Come! Let us go to bed!"

When Noel was alone in his beautiful bedroom, hearing now much more clearly than in the patio the roar of the storm, he took off his jacket and waistcoat, his collar and tie, undid his braces, and sat down on the low Arab

bed between the painted wooden posts. With his elbows on his knees and his fists pressed against his hot cheeks he brooded over what had happened that night.

He ought not to have accepted Madame de Pleunier's invitation to stay in Dar El Manzar. He ought to have come without bringing his suitcase and have insisted on going home after dinner. She would have been obliged to yield to his decision without making a fuss. Now he might have to stay on for three or four days.

The storm seemed to be growing fiercer. Although the walls of the house were thick he was so much more aware of it now than he had been in the patio that he was tricked into the conviction of its steadily rising fury. Three or four nights before he could get back to Sir Tom's house unless he was objectionably rude. And he couldn't be that.

But perhaps she . . .

For a moment his heart felt lighter. She had surely realized something that night, must have realized it when, after that long searching look at him, she had suddenly shut up her fan and said, "Come! Let us go to bed!" And they had parted quite amicably at the top of the staircase. She had said good night with a smile. But hadn't there been a satirical look in her eyes, an expression of satire that was cruel? It had made him feel hot with a sort of shame.

But anyhow—she had gone!

He felt genuinely, even deeply, sorry for her. And yet he had felt relief. For now he was quite positive that she knew nothing, suspected nothing, about his crazy affair with Aziza. Before this he had believed she knew nothing. But now he could be quite sure. She would never have spoken as she had if she had known, would never have said to *him*, "I have liked, been attracted by, the wrong sort of men." She could not suppose he was one of those men. Sabatier was one of them, and Noel knew now that certainly she must have loved Sabatier after the brutal deception she had had with her husband. And now, evidently, she must have fallen in love with himself. He no longer had any doubt about that. He knew it at last. But she must also know now that he couldn't feel as she did. No words had been said about that, but she had realized it when she had shut up her fan.

He felt desperately sorry for her and sorry for himself too. What a hateful situation to be in!

He sprang up from the bed with a sort of violence, went into the bathroom, and turned on both the taps. He put a hand to them. They both gave cold water. He let them run, quickly undressed, and was soon in the bath. He only stayed there for an instant. The shock was a tonic. He dried himself hard with a great rough towel and got into bed, glowing, his body cheered up but his mind still tormented and trying to envisage the future. The storm implacably roared outside. He fell asleep in its tumult, wondering about life. How would he and Madame de Pleunier meet on the morrow? How would they get through the next days?

In the morning he woke and at once heard the storm. There was no lull in it. She was right. It would last on for three days, perhaps even for longer than that. What would happen to-day? When would he see her? What would they do? What would they talk about? What could she think of him now? That satirical look in her eyes which he had noticed!

It had been a rebuke wrapped up in a cruel humour, a garment of humour to save the situation.

He lay still for a long time in a sort of fatalistic apathy, yet always mentally busy in a vague tormented way. And presently he heard a faint sound detached entirely from the roar of the storm. What was it? He heard it again, a very soft tap on the door. He sat up in bed. Could . . . ? He looked at his watch. It was half-past eight.

"*Entrez !*" he called.

The door opened, and Hassan, after a slight pause, came in with a tray covered with a cloth the colour of oatmeal. On it the breakfast was arranged. The boy came in smiling. But wasn't there a satirical look in his eyes too? Noel fancied there was.

"*Bonjour, Hassan !*" he said.

"*Bonjour, moosoo.*"

"*Merci bien.*"

Hassan put the tray, which was of wood and long with four tiny legs, across the bed in front of Noel. Two legs came down on either side of his body.

"*Voilà, moosoo.*"

"*Merci bien,*" said Noel again.

And the boy went softly out, always smiling.

What didn't that boy know? What didn't he understand? The coffee was perfect. The cream was thick. The rolls, the toast, the butter, the eggs, the marmalade, were delicious. And the room, even in the dull obscurity caused by the whirling sand of the storm, looked exquisite in its thought-out simplicity. But Noel wished he were back in the house of Sir Tom. He didn't know how he was going to face Madame de Pleunier, how she would face him after what had happened last night.

He hadn't realized even yet that he had to deal with an accomplished woman of the world, who, though in certain moments, chosen by her as suitable, she might unveil some of her mysteries, would know when to wear the world's veil and how to wear it with complete self-possession.

He stayed late in his bedroom. Two books had been put there by someone; by Madame de Pleunier, he supposed. One was French, the *Confessions* of Rousseau; the other English, Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyám*. Hassan came to remove the breakfast tray. Noel told him gently he need not come back. No valeting was necessary. The boy bowed and submitted, looking, however, very serious. Noel wondered what was in his mind. When he had gone Noel took up the *Omar Khayyám*. He knew it, of course. But it was a long time since he had read it, and the profound sadness of it, combined with the determination to drink the wine cup each day to the dregs, affected him powerfully.

Why could he not put the cup to his lips and fling off, if only for a moment, his ugly sense of the underneath of life? Why could he not live for the day and the night with someone who only asked to live for them too?

"I will! I will!" he asserted to himself as at last he laid the book down.

And for the first time since he had had the power really to think he said to himself:

"Probably this is all we shall ever have! I'm of no importance. There's nothing in *me* worthy of an eternal life. Let me try to have some moments

of happiness and to make someone else, who has been wretched like myself, happy too."

Madame de Pleunier had been disillusioned by her husband and evidently, later, by Sabatier, who nevertheless must have been her lover.

'Now she has turned to me, not knowing what I am and what I have done. Why should I undeceive her? Why should I make her feel that I, too, am one of those queer men of whom she spoke with such bitterness?'

At last he got up, made his toilet, and dressed. And he went downstairs with a new resolve.

He wandered about in the beautiful house from patio to patio, penetrated into two or three rooms that he had not yet seen, went up into the musicians' gallery, and from it looked down into the calm perfection below, appreciating, though uncultured in the specialized knowledge of interiors, the marvellous taste and understanding of appropriate beauty that had brought into being Dar El Manzar. He descended and lingered awhile by the fountain, almost forgetting the storm that was always raging outside. The two Arabs in white and red came to prepare the marble table for *déjeuner*. Then Hassan came down the staircase with his curious gliding movement.

"*Madame vient maintenant, moosoo.*"

"*Ah—bien!*"

And at last Madame de Pleunier came, smiling and looking totally unconscious that there could be any difficulty between them.

"Nice to find somebody here!" she said, holding out her hand in greeting.

"Somebody!"

"Nice to find *you* here!" she said more warmly.

And they sat down to *déjeuner*.

The day—second day of the storm—seemed to Noel to slip away with surprising swiftness, entirely free from the difficulties he had anticipated and wondered about and been afraid of. The behaviour of Madame de Pleunier prevented them, but he detected no obstinate purpose in that behaviour. The quiet perfection of it resembled the art that conceals art. What was hidden was so completely hidden that it did not seem to exist. There was no reference to the confession of the previous night, and her manner showed no remembrance of it bringing self-consciousness. Nor was there the least hint at any time of resentment for the deception she must have suffered before going to bed and have known that he was aware of. And her accomplished ease of manner brought at last ease to him.

The storm, of course, kept them indoors all day. In Sir Tom's house he would have found this terribly irksome and been devoured by restlessness, boredom, and dislike of himself. Not so in Dar El Manzar. Sir Tom's house would have seemed like a cage. The house of the Varennes, full of space, of beauty, and of an atmosphere so essentially calm that even the storm could not destroy it, took away from Noel all desire for the world outside. For once he thoroughly understood the possibility of finding charm in the *vie casanière* which some women become so devoted to, a life in which the fact of an outside world is not forgotten but is remembered with distaste and the happiness of ignoring it. There were even moments when he found himself wishing the storm to continue and now and then, when a short lull in it came and the roar of the wind was lessened, having an instant of anxiety.



"I think the storm is dying away," he said to Madame de Pleunier in one of these lulls.

"I'm afraid not," she answered with a smile and a slight hint of satire which didn't hurt him. "It is only a lull. The beast crouching for another spring. We shall have to resign ourselves certainly to another full day of it and at least two more nights. But I don't mind, unless you do."

He shook his head. She looked at his hair.

"I'm enjoying this," he said.

"That's what I want. It's difficult to be miserable or bored in this lovely house. And *to-day* you seem to be in such a good mood."

He thought of his reading of *Omar Khayyâm* and the resolve he had made.

"Do you ever live just for the day?" he asked.

"I have," she said. "But that was a long time ago. I should like to again."

For a moment she looked very grave, even sad, and her eyes were fixed upon his.

"And you?" she added.

"I don't think I have ever lived only for the day till I came to North Africa," he said. "I believe in the desert I did. Each day was so exactly like the other. I think I often forgot the past and didn't bother about the future. Except now and then," he added hastily, remembering all the plans he had made for his life with Aziza in Tunis. "I believe the desert abolishes a lot."

"You've never told me anything about your life in England."

"Oh, it was very uninteresting," he said quickly. "Except, of course, to me. I was the student type. Always up to the neck in books. Trying to improve my mind."

"And did you improve it?"

"I thought so at the time. I'm not so sure now."

He knew she was aware of evasion on his part and was aware that for some reason he didn't wish her to know how exactly he had lived. And he realized that, with the exception of Sabatier, the few white people he had met in Touggourt, Bernard, the De Pleuniers, Madame de Varenne, and no doubt Father Anastase, must all have wondered whether he had any profession, any business, or was merely what Englishmen call 'a waster,' a young man with some money and delicate health who did nothing particular and probably never had done anything of any importance. They must all think very little of him surely, but, if so, they hadn't shown their smallness of thought of him. Suddenly he felt ashamed and wished he could make her understand that he had been a real worker, though not in the way of the men among whom she had usually lived.

"I was just a student," he said again. "Trying to stuff my mind—and so on."

A lame enough explanation. She was so acute that she must certainly know he was concealing something from her.

"I have felt now and then that in the past you must have burned a good deal of midnight oil," she said. "And perhaps to your physical detriment. But now you look strong."

"North Africa has done wonders for my health."

"Were you really ill?"

"The man I consulted in London told me I was on the way to be very ill."

"And it was he who sent you to the desert?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad!" she said simply.

Noel had never noticed in her so much apparent simplicity and sincerity as he noticed that day. She was at her very best, in his opinion. The woman of the world, completely at home in Paris, the Commandant's wife, at home among the officers of the army of Africa, was lost in just the human woman, unmarked for the moment by any stamp of social rank or of professional standing.

He liked her much better so and felt more akin to her.

"To-night we are going to have music again," she said. "And here come the Arabs with our tea. We'll have it in the inner room. That will be cosy. To me that word 'cosy' seems the most English of words. It reminds me of life in your English country houses, with fires blazing and curtains drawn and the lovely feeling one has after a hard day's hunting is over. I have hunted in Leicestershire."

"I wish I had!" Noel murmured as he followed her into the farther room.

He frowned as he walked behind her. What a lot he had missed! And if this were the only life? Where was his sense of religion? The storm rose again outside, and he felt it was lost in the storm.

Sincerity sometimes begets sincerity, and the charm of simplicity is so great that often it elicits an echo. Madame de Pleunier's effort that day, and it was great, was so successful that it produced a strange reaction in Noel. He felt, as he had once felt with Sabatier, a strong desire to be more frank with her than he had been. On the previous evening she had certainly been wonderfully frank with him. She had even done a most difficult thing. In telling him about her husband she had confessed to humiliation. Could he match her frankness, not by a confession of his liaison in Touggourt—he could never do that—but by telling her what he had told to Sabatier? She had given him a chance to do it in the afternoon, and he had not taken it. When he went up to his room before dinner to put on his dark blue suit he went to his locked luggage and opened it. Should he put on his clerical clothes? That would tell her without words. She had stayed and hunted in England. She must have at least seen English clergymen. If he put those clothes on she would know.

And then?

He picked up the jam-pot collar, then looked at his throat in the glass. He felt the high black silk waistcoat. Was he now the man who had any right to wear the livery of a religion? He felt he was not, that to wear it would be a travesty. But, nevertheless, he hesitated. Perhaps it would be better, much better, if she knew. It might prevent something which had very nearly happened last night, a step on her part which would be irrevocable and must, if it were made, entirely change their relations. Either it would consolidate them or it would end them. The result would depend upon him, on his conduct. He remembered his resolve of the morning. Could he stick to it when the critical moment came? And the critical moment would come. In spite of what had happened on the previous night,

her shutting up of her fan in that decisive, that almost brutal way, their parting on the top of the staircase in a perfectly amiable and suddenly conventional manner, he knew it must come. She was a woman of purpose, a woman who, when she had made up her mind, would carry a thing through to the end. She might, of course, be defeated, but she would take the risk. He felt that she would have taken the risk last night if she had not been certain of the storm continuing for at least three days. And this was the night succeeding the second day.

He hesitated for a long time by the suitcase, divided between the urge of his resolve of the morning and a hesitation that he could not get rid of. And it seemed to him presently that his resolve was spurious, a forced energy of the mind, and that his hesitation was inherent, something that had its roots in his character. Travesty or not, he would put on the clergyman's livery and reward her frankness by his.

He bent down and took all the black clothes out of the luggage and laid them out on the bed. How mournfully black they looked, the long black coat, the high black silk waistcoat, the black trousers! Emblems of his former life; black emblems of the life that already seemed so very far off. He had packed a white shirt to match the white collar—in case. He had even packed a pair of black socks. Black evening shoes he had worn with his blue suit on the previous night. They would 'go' with the rest.

He sighed. It was hard to do, and he was nervous about her reaction, but he must do it. Her frankness had made him sick of deception. He took off his coloured socks and began to put on the black ones.

All this time he had been so busy with his indecision and the debate in his mind that he had not realized the quickly passing moments, and he was startled when a tap came on his door. It must be Hassan. The blood surged to his face. The jam-pot collar was round his neck. The black silk waistcoat came up to it. Only the long black coat with its flapping ends remained to put on. He seized it and thrust his arms into the sleeves. The tap came again. He called out:

"*Entrez !*"

The door opened. It was Hassan. When he saw the black figure confronting him he stared, and for an instant his shining intelligent eyes held a stupid look, as if astonishment had for the moment withdrawn his sharpness, emptied him of it. Then he opened his mouth, and one word came out on a breath:

"Marabout !"

"*Qu'est-ce que vous dites ?*" said Noel in a harsh voice.

"*Diner—moosoo !*" murmured Hassan.

And he moved backwards out of the doorway and hurried off out of sight. Noel believed that he was hurrying to tell Madame de Pleunier the news of his transformation. The extraordinary effect his clothes had had on the boy made him realize how much they must have changed his appearance, more, surely, than he had expected. Or—perhaps Hassan had simply been startled by seeing something quite different from what he had anticipated. In those days ignorant Arabs called any man who was the servant of a religion '*un marabout*.' Hassan's exclamation was therefore quite understandable. But Noel, not knowing that and thinking that the term marabout meant only a holy man of the Moslem faith, felt confused

and embarrassed, almost as a man in travesty who had dressed up as Charles the First might have felt on being taken for Oliver Cromwell.

He must go down, however. But—one moment! How did he look? He went to the mirror. His brown face was still flushed, and his eyes, he thought, looked guilty and dreadfully self-conscious. But he must go down. She was waiting. And what was Hassan telling her?

He went out of the room with an unnaturally deliberate step and closed the door very gently behind him.

As he descended the staircase slowly and quietly, 'getting hold' of himself as he went, he saw the marble table laid for dinner near the fountain and, in the distance, Madame de Pleunier with her back turned towards him, apparently waiting for something. She wore a black gown without any relief of white.

'We match!' he thought sombrely.

But they didn't match in anything but the colour of their clothes, and he knew it.

What was she looking at, waiting for? Ah—Hassan! Now he saw the boy coming towards her from the room beyond the patio, and he was carrying in his hand a large bright red flower. She received it and then did something, moving her hands and arms. She must be fastening it into her gown. Hassan was staring beyond her, but she was looking down for the moment at the flower and not at him. Her head was bent. There was no band round it. He saw the soft light in the patio shine on her reddish-brown hair.

Then she lifted her head and must have seen Hassan's face, for she turned rather sharply, almost like somebody startled.

Noel went towards her, keeping his eyes always fixed upon her because he wanted so much to look away from her. He had to defy his own feeling. There was nothing else to be done. He didn't say anything. She must speak first. And if she didn't make any comment upon his appearance he wouldn't say anything.

As he came up to her she said:

"You have dressed for dinner!"

Her brows were drawn together; her voice sounded astonished, and now her eyes stared at him.

"But why like——? Englishmen don't——"

She broke off, looked at his clothes, then lifted her eyes to his face.

"What is the meaning of this costume?" she said.

Her voice had become suddenly sharp.

"You look almost like some sort of priest," she said. "Surely——"

"I am a priest."

"You're a *priest*!"

"Not in your sense of the word, not a Roman Catholic priest. I'm an English Protestant clergyman."

"Ah!" she exclaimed on an indrawn breath that was almost a gasp.

"Well, whatever you are, you certainly are an eccentric. An eccentric—yes, an eccentric."

As she repeated the word her voice rose, and then she suddenly began to laugh uncontrollably. There was no humour in her laughter, no healthy, happy humour. It was shrill and sounded utterly satirical.

"*You* an English Protestant clergyman!" she said, speaking through

her laughter. "Are there many like you in England? What a wonderful country to breed such clergymen! Is it possible that——?"

Probably the expression on his face suddenly recalled her to a sense of the *convenances*, for, evidently making a fierce effort, she abruptly stopped laughing.

"An English clergyman, are you?" she said in a hard voice. "Oh, if that's all——"

"I don't quite understand," said Noel.

"Don't be angry! You know we Catholics—*Roman* Catholics if you like—don't look on a Protestant clergyman as we do on a priest—even on a priest like Father Anastase, who's been in trouble. But——"

Suddenly she noticed Hassan still with them, his underjaw dropped, his eyes devouring them. With extreme sharpness she spoke some words of Arabic to him. He disappeared like a flash, running over the Persian carpets.

"So *that's* your secret!" she then said. "I—we all at Touggourt wondered exactly what you were, if you were anything. Oh, but I don't know about Sabatier!"

"I told Sabatier long ago that I was a clergyman."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell the rest of us?"

"That—that would take a long time to explain, and perhaps you would never understand. It was all so different out here! I had never been out of England. You were all so different from the people I had known. I thought if you knew I—I should never have a chance. And I wanted to taste a new way of life without having it utterly spoiled for me. Perhaps it was cowardly. It was. But—it was like that."

She gazed at him for a moment with profound consideration. Then her face softened.

"A new way of life, was it? Well, I must say you seem to have——"

She stopped. Satire was coming again into her voice. She waited for a moment, then said carefully, governing her voice:

"And so you told Sabatier! I wonder exactly why."

"I found I could. He's a very unusual man."

"Yes—he is, and in several ways. You knew he wouldn't tell?"

"Yes."

"Why have you let me know this evening? That's what I don't understand."

"I think because you were so frank with me about yourself last night."

"That was it!"

She stretched out her hand.

"Frankness for frankness!"

She pressed the hand he held out.

"Now we must come to dinner. Look at those two dark creatures waiting—and not understanding!"

She seemed to have got over the shock—it evidently had been a shock—of his new manifestation and resumed a more usual manner. They went to the dinner table and sat down side by side.

"You must forgive me if I——" she broke off, waited a moment, then said:

"Put it down to the storm. It seems to upset everything for the moment.

You'll tell me more presently. I want to understand better. But I think I do begin to understand, at any rate partially. You know, my friend, you're not so easy to know really. I've had a considerable experience of men, as you may imagine, but you are really out of the common. I've never known anyone quite like *you*. Even Marguerite de Varenne was decidedly puzzled by you."

"Why did she come to Touggourt?"

"Perhaps I'll tell you that—eventually."

"Had it something to do with me?"

"Perhaps it had."

During the dinner Noel came rapidly to the conclusion that his access of sincerity had got him out of the difficult, the almost intolerable situation which earlier in the day he had made up his mind to confront, perhaps in a totally different way. The knowledge Madame de Pleunier had so unexpectedly gained of him seemed to have softened her, to have made her feel more happily intimate with him. Instead of raising a barrier between them it seemed to have had the opposite effect. He couldn't understand this, but he accepted it and was thankful. He had done the right thing at last. It had been very difficult to do, and her reception of it had angered and distressed him. He could not easily forget her burst of uncontrollable laughter or her exclamation when he had said he was a Protestant clergyman: "Oh, if that's all!" But how quickly she had changed from satire to sympathy! And how delightfully unshockable she evidently was. That, perhaps, was owing to the fact that she was French. But if he had been a Catholic priest, like Father Anastase, certainly she would have been horrified. She had looked horrified when she had said, "You're a *priest*!" And yet he remembered that she had not seemed at all shocked when, in Touggourt, she had told him that Father Anastase had been sent there *en pénitence* because he had had an affair with a woman in Tunis.

A contradiction there! Wasn't there? He was puzzled. But the talk flowed on between them, and he hoped, and almost believed, that the difficult situation he had been so unhappy about had been saved.

He almost believed, because he wanted so much to. But in spite of his natural *naïveté*, which not even his experience in Touggourt had wholly got rid of, there was a trickle of doubt through his mind, like a tiny stream creeping through pebbles. Would a woman who had travelled from Paris to Sidi Bou Said for a man—and she must have done that—so easily reconcile herself to the new situation? And she had said that she was a lonely woman and had made him believe it absolutely. She was lonely and she was seeking. And this seeking had led her to Sidi Bou Said, and had led her to him. He couldn't doubt that in spite of his complete lack of male vanity. Then could she really have changed so quickly, so easily, so almost comfortably, from the woman who had shut up the fan on the previous night into the woman who sat beside him now, eating and talking as if she had not a care in the world?

Yet she did not seem to be acting. She seemed to like him better, and in a charming and friendly way, because he had told her the truth of himself. Frankness for frankness. He said to himself:

"There must be a lot of good in her."

And perhaps that was going to prevail. Perhaps now she knew what

he was all would be well between them. And she would leave him to his memory of the girl in the green shawl, of which she knew nothing.

What an odd boy Hassan was! He must, though Noel had always distrusted him, be full of discretion. When he had hurried out of Noel's bedroom evidently he had not gone to tell Madame de Pleunier that her friend was 'un marabout.' For he had not told. Otherwise Madame de Pleunier would not have been astonished when she saw the clergyman's livery. And Hassan had not told what he knew certainly about Noel and Aziza. He was a puzzle. One thing Noel was positive of. Hassan fully understood why his mistress had come back to Africa instead of spending her summer in France.

Towards the end of dinner Madame de Pleunier said :

"You saw the two books I put in your bedroom?"

"Oh, yes. Did *you* put them? I ought to have thanked you."

"You can thank me now."

"I do."

"You knew them, no doubt?"

"Yes. I had read them both, but a long time ago."

"As one treats classics! Did you look into them?"

"I refreshed my memory of Omar Khayyám."

"Although I am a Catholic I love that. There's something in one that can't always live for eternity but *must* live sometimes for the day—and the night. Didn't you feel that when you looked into *Omar Khayyám*?"

"I did!" he said, surprised by her intuition. "But how could you know?"

Her answer made him feel once more uneasy. She said :

"Because I know and have known for some time that you and I are akin in certain ways. Hark! The storm is rising again!"

"Yes, I believe it is."

She got up from the table. Dinner was finished.

"Let us come and sit under the gallery once more."

As they went there she added :

"We shall have another day and two more nights of storm."

She glanced at him.

"I am enjoying this storm."

When they were under the gallery she said :

"I told you I had ordered the musicians to come after dinner. But shall we have them?"

"Just as you like."

"I think we'll keep them for to-morrow, the last night, perhaps, of the storm and your stay here. Shall we?"

"Certainly, if you like."

"And we'll just talk. There's so much to say now. You must tell me about yourself."

She clapped her hands. Hassan came. It seemed that he was always in hiding not very far off. She gave an order. He disappeared.

"Now they won't come."

That night she hadn't the fan. The two Arab servants cleared away and brought coffee and cigarettes. Noel had brought down his pipe. They were left alone. Noel didn't notice at the time but knew later that orangeade, ice, and glasses had been placed on the marble table. Madame de

Pleunier's austere-looking French maid, who believed in hell but didn't bother to condemn sinners because they would be attended to later on, did not reappear. The great patio was left to them and the storm, whose voice came to them continuously from outside, but so softened by the thick walls that it was not disturbing. It only underlined faintly the peace and beauty within. '*Luxe, calme, et volupté.*'

And they talked.

When she chose to take the trouble Madame de Pleunier was an almost perfect mistress of the art of conversation. For she conversed. She did not tell you. She did not sink into a dreadful morass of anecdote. She did not probe you with questions till you felt the dissecting knife at work on you. Nor did she drown you in egoism till you longed for a lifebelt. But without seeming to she led you on, and always she knew where she was going and why she was taking you with her. When you wanted to talk she listened, and when you wanted to listen—and she knew how to bring that about—she talked.

On the previous night she had talked of herself, had told Noel something intimate about her own life. Now all her interest seemed to be directed, but never piercingly, to him. She let him know that he had always seemed—not exactly mysterious: no!—but had seemed sufficiently different from others to make her wonder about him and to want to know more about him than he chose to reveal.

"My husband couldn't make you out at all," she said. "But then he's so very military now, and African-military. Bernard was puzzled, too, I think."

"He never told me so."

"Ah! But when he invited us to that dinner he said we should meet a young Englishman *pas du tout ordinaire.*"

"I often think that's just what I am—ordinary."

"No, you aren't."

"But—in what way not?"

She seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then she said:

"There is a contradiction in you somewhere."

"But—what——?"

"I think perhaps it's between your life of the mind and your physical life. Are they in accord, do you think?"

"I don't know really," said Noel, suddenly uncomfortable.

"That may be, perhaps, because that doctor you told me of jerked you out of one life into another totally different."

(She had already led him on to tell her something of what had happened to him in England, how he had been before he had ever seen Africa.)

"When I first met you, you gave me the impression of a man either waked out of a dream and startled, or of one startled by being plunged into a dream, or into what seemed to him like a sort of astonishing dream."

"It might have been both," Noel murmured, almost as if to himself.

"Was it? Anyhow, it made you interesting—to all of us."

"Was I?"

"Yes. Even to my husband."

This statement really surprised Noel.

"He didn't understand you, of course. But he liked you."

"I'm glad."



"We all liked you. *You* were fresh, and I think we had all grown rather stale in the sands. Except, perhaps, Sabatier. And even he—I don't know——"

She waited a moment, glanced at Noel meditatively, but only for an instant, then added :

"I wanted to protect your freshness."

Noel flushed. He damned himself for that, but he couldn't help it.

"Perhaps that was stupid of me. But I've lived among men in whom what I call freshness is very rare. I wanted to—but of course I couldn't."

She said the last words very slowly, almost as if something dragged them out of her.

"How could—staleness do that ? No. You had more effect on me than I had on you *then*."

She was talking now, he felt, almost like one in self-communion, speaking to clarify her own mind rather than to give him information. And this made him feel in a very peculiar way that he was entering into her mind as a man may enter into a place that is dark.

"You made me realize something of what I had lost. There was a good deal more of morning in you than there was in me, or in any of those by whom I was surrounded. But you seemed to change—a little—as time went on. Don't you think you did ?"

Again she glanced at him and immediately looked away.

"I wasn't specially—well, perhaps I did. There is something in Africa, the only part of it I know, that has a very strong influence. Everyone must be affected by it."

"Most people certainly are, I think. But you, after all, are only at the beginning of your experience. It would be a pity, it seems to me, if *you* were to be completely taken by Africa."

"That's not likely."

"Why not, if you don't take care ?"

"Because I suppose—I'm practically sure—that my life won't keep me long in Africa. I came here for a purpose."

"To get well."

"Yes. And I believe that before very long, another winter perhaps, I shall be quite well."

"And then ?"

"Then—I don't know. I can't imagine how it will be then."

"Be like Omar Khayyám. Drink the cup before it's dashed from your lips. But don't drink a cup that is poisoned !"

Her last words startled Noel and took away from him the pleasant feeling that had been his during part of the dinner. He looked at her with sudden sharpness, as if wishing to penetrate to the bottom of the thought that had prompted them. But she was looking down and did not see his glance. What could have induced her to say that ?

"Why should you think I might do that ?" he said.

"I don't know. But men often do it out here and in the desert. Too often."

"You are thinking of your husband, perhaps ? Forgive me ! And perhaps of Sabatier ?"

"Perhaps. And of others."

Noel hesitated. Something in her tone and manner affected him strangely, unpleasantly.

"And women? Do they never do that?" he said finally.

"I am not much interested in women. Perhaps because I am one. I have only one great woman friend, only one."

"Madame de Varenne?"

"Yes."

"You said you would tell me why she came to Touggourt."

"Did I? Or did I only say perhaps I would tell you?"

"Was it? You would rather not tell me?"

"There are two things I might tell you and that I hinted at telling you. That about Marguerite and another about Sabatier. Why I changed my intention of not seeing him here and wished to see him. It was not merely because, as he was an old friend, I felt really I ought, out of politeness, to see him. There was another reason."

"Had it something to do with me?"

"Yes."

"And I think you implied that Madame de Varenne's visit to Touggourt had something to do with me, too, though I can't think how that could be."

"I wanted her to see you, to know you, and to tell me what she thought of you," she said with a sudden bluntness that astonished him.

Her almost feverish excitement of the evening before, noticeable in the expression of her eyes and in her manner, had given place to a sort of self-control that he began to feel now must be the result of a strong and very conscious effort of the will. Behind it, perhaps, even probably, there was heat, but if so it was heat held in check. She was governing it.

"We shan't be disturbed again to-night," she said. "Shall I tell you?"

The sentence, applied to him, seemed to be addressed to herself. There was an inward look in her eyes.

"I seem to be telling you a great many things, but"—she looked at his clothes, her eyes travelling up and down their blackness—"but you have told me something too."

"Yes."

"I told you last night I was a lonely woman. Every lonely woman, if she sees a chance, or thinks she does, of mitigating her loneliness, catches at it. That's understandable, don't you think?"

"Yes."

"You came to the desert with the dew on you—into the sands. I liked you from the first, though I didn't understand you quite. I came to feel I should like you for a friend. I had had great disappointments—one, as you know, was my husband. And I had had another almost equally great. A sort of repetition. Life is full of abominable repetitions."

When she said that her voice became fierce. Noel knew she was thinking of Sabatier. She must have loved him in ignorance of his 'queer' tastes and then have found them out. A repetition of what had happened with her husband.

'And now——!' he thought with almost a sensation of guilt.

But she didn't know. She must never know.

"But I wanted you for a friend. You attracted me very much, partly because you were so very different from all the men I had known. You weren't at all even like any priest I had met, not at all, though you are a

clergyman. But a Catholic priest and a Protestant clergyman have no resemblance, though both are supposed to be exponents of a religion and servants of Christ. I, a Catholic, could never be what I call *friends* with a priest. There would always be something against that, a *difference*. I don't feel it with you even now. I shall never feel it."

"No?" said Noel.

He moved. He had to do something just then. He knocked out the remains of tobacco from his pipe and refilled it.

"No. Your being a clergyman doesn't seem to make any difference."

She said this with great definiteness, great decision, almost, indeed, with defiance.

"I was surprised when I knew, of course! But then it seemed to make several things clear to me."

"But why did you laugh?"

"Did I?"

"Yes. You must know you did."

"A touch of hysteria caused by the storm. You and I—we are neither of us quite normal to-night. But where was I?"

He kindled his pipe.

"Ah, I know! I was wondering how much I would tell you."

She sent him again one of her deeply meditative, deeply considering looks.

"But about Marguerite. I wrote and asked her to come to Touggourt and then go on with me to Paris because I wanted her to see you."

"Such a journey only for that?"

"She is a friend and would do a great deal for me."

"Did she like me?"

"Enough—to understand."

"What?"

"My feeling for you, why I wanted you for a friend."

Noel now, of course, understood why Madame de Pleunier had tried to interest him in Sir Tom's house. He had suspected it for a long time, had come to feel almost sure of it. Now he was absolutely certain. He was here in Sidi Bou Said because she had intended him to be here, had decided that he should be here. She had planned. He had fallen in with her plan. The death of her father had provided her with a convenient excuse for doing what she would have done in any case, what she had always meant to do from the day she had first spoken to Noel of Sidi Bou Said.

For a moment he felt that he had been a tool in her hands. It was not a pleasant conviction. He drew on his pipe and looked on the ground and was very conscious again of the storm roaring outside. She had just said that neither of them was normal. Probably it was true of them both at this moment. But the sulky, almost injured and rebellious feeling that had hold of him now was surely the normal feeling of a male suddenly conscious that a woman's wiles had got the better of him.

"What is the matter?" she asked him.

"Nothing."

"You can't be angry with me for wishing to have you as a friend, surely?"

"No. But there's another thing!"

"What is it?"

"About Sabatier. That had something to do with me. Your deciding you would see him after all, must see him. And not wishing me to be there. Why was that?"

"I didn't wish him to set you against me."

"Sabatier! Did you think he would do such a thing?"

"I don't say I thought he would. But it was possible that he might. He liked you."

"Why should the fact of his liking me make him do what you were afraid of? Really—it seems to me that you were afraid he might warn me of something."

"And did he?"

"No. What should there be? I don't understand."

"Sabatier is queer. I told you. And queer men do queer things. If I hadn't seen him he might possibly—I don't say he would!"

"Possibly—what?"

"Have given you a bad impression of me," she said slowly.

"I don't think he's the sort of man who would do a thing like that."

"Nor do I, really. But"—it seemed to Noel that again she hesitated and then came to a strong resolve—"liking often creates stupid fears. And I like you very much. That's why I came here. Surely you must know that now."

She paused, looking at him with a fixed, almost implacable expression. He said nothing.

"Don't you?"

He thought of his resolve of the morning. Since then it had weakened. Could he call it up again? There was a turmoil of conflicting thoughts, conflicting emotions within him, confusing him.

"Yes!" he said at last in a low voice.

She leaned forward, still with that fixed, terribly steady look in her red-brown eyes. He felt her body against his. She put her hands on his shoulders.

"I want you as a friend. I want you as more, much more than a friend. I *need* you."

Madame de Pleunier had prophesied a life of three days and nights for that storm from the desert. She had underrated its vitality, the angry voice that possessed the Sahara. It endured for four days and nights, then died away suddenly, as if from exhaustion. The fifth day dawned over a world magically restored to a tranquillity that at first seemed unnatural, like the dreamlike tranquillity of a mirage. One could scarcely believe in it, in its radiant clearness, its untarnished peace, the silence of it, the stillness of every leaf of palm tree, pepper tree, ficus and mimosa. A world wearied out, perhaps, by what it had gone through, but now resting under a bright sky, with Tunis la Blanche visible once more in the distance at the mirror-like edge of the bitter lakes.

And under this bright sky, through the white village of Sidi Bou Saïd, a man exhausted walked silently uphill, attended by an Arab boy bearing a suitcase: Noel, attended by Hassan, going back to the house of Sir Tom.

Noel walked slowly without glancing about him. Hassan crept always close behind him, looking very solemn and important. It seemed as if the

intense peace coming after the four days of storm had impressed even his leaping and larky spirit. He did not reply to the occasional greetings of passing neighbours. Nor did Noel. Both seemed absorbed in their thoughts.

When they reached Sir Tom's house Bakouch met them. He looked just as usual, as if he had continued to eat of the lotus, and with the necessary salutation, uttered in a drowsy voice, took the suitcase from Hassan and prepared to carry it into the house, which looked very small and ordinary after Dar El Manzar.

Then Noel felt in his pockets, drew out a note, and gave it to Hassan without looking at him.

"*Merci, moosoo.*"

Noel glanced at Hassan for a moment. Their eyes met. The boy, with his shrewd boy's knowledge, looked hard at the man whose eyes seemed to try to repel him, to beat back his look.

"*Au revoir !*"

"*Au revoir, moosoo.*"

Noel followed Bakouch into the house. Hassan glanced at the note in his hand and ceased to look solemn. The Roumi had been generous. Well, he ought to be generous. Men were usually generous after *that*. And, suddenly frolicsome, Hassan skipped off into the village. He was feeling amused. The Roumi knew that he knew and wished that he didn't. An Arab wouldn't have minded, would, on the contrary, have been satisfied and proud. These Roumis were funny sometimes. And this particular Roumi was one of the oddest he had ever come across. Not at all like the French officers to whose ways Hassan was accustomed at Touggourt. They didn't care what an Arab boy thought of them, what he knew or suspected. They were above all that, and because of their attitude Hassan respected them. He didn't dislike Noel. (He glanced again at his note.) But the intimacy of his thoughts about Noel kept respect at a little distance. And this Roumi didn't like him. But there was a reason for that, a reason connected with Touggourt.

In her beautiful bedroom in Dar El Manzar, Madame de Pleunier was lying asleep. She did not know yet that the storm had abated. She did not know that Noel had gone.

The first thing Noel did when he went into Sir Tom's house was strictly conventional. While Bakouch was unpacking the suitcase—let him see the clerical clothes! Who cared now?—Noel went into the upstairs sitting-room with the painted glass and sat down to write a letter of thanks to his hostess of four days and nights. While doing this, incredible though it seemed even to himself, he felt dreadfully formal. And—he couldn't help it—he wrote formally.

DEAR MADAME DE PLEUNIER,

*As the weather was absolutely clear this morning, when I woke rather early, I felt that I simply mustn't trespass upon your kind hospitality any further. I had a wonderful visit. Thank you for it. I should like, of course, to have said—*

He paused; he wanted to write 'good-bye.' Should he? No, he mustn't. And he wrote:

au revoir, but didn't dare to disturb you. Hassan kindly carried my suitcase. I shall send this by Bakouch.

Yours very sincerely,

NOEL HERRIOT.

He read it over. After what had happened the formality of it seemed preposterous. But it must go as it was without alteration. And he thrust it into an envelope, addressed it, and gave it to Bakouch, who had just finished unpacking his suitcase.

"Please take this to Dar El Manzar for Madame de Pleunier."

"Réponse, moosoo?"

"Non. Pas de réponse."

Bakouch went away.

Noel had breakfasted in Dar El Manzar. Hassan had seen to that. The empty day was before him.

What day of the week was it? He couldn't remember and asked the gardener.

"Mercredi, moosoo."

Wednesday was a bathing day. The carriage would come for him, and he would get away for some hours from Sidi Bou Said. If only she didn't send a note asking him to come to lunch at Dar El Manzar. Or perhaps to dinner. But he wouldn't accept any invitation. He must be alone all day. He needed complete isolation. He could make some excuse. He was away from the beautiful prison and out of the cage of the storm. He must have some liberty.

Bakouch came back. He had no message. Probably *she* was still sleeping. But presently—when she woke!

Noel was dreadfully afraid of being caught before the carriage arrived from La Marsa.

But at last came the sound of the bells on the horses' necks. He was waiting in the garden with his bathing things, went out instantly, and got into the carriage.

"*Allez vite!*" he cried to the coachman.

The man looked surprised, perhaps by the violence of the cry, and whipped up his horses. They trotted away through the village and down the hill to the plain of Ariana.

At that moment Noel wished ardently that he was going away from Sidi Bou Said, not only for some hours, but for ever.

Already he knew that he had done the wrong thing, the thing that it was fatally wrong for him to have done. Now that he was out of the beautiful prison and the cage of the storm he knew that he could not prolong the relation into which he had so recklessly entered with Madame de Pleunier. He simply could not 'go on with it.'

Then what was to be done?

He had lost his head, had gone out from his essential character, had played a part. And now he was full of remorse. All that had happened between him and Aziza in Touggourt had never shocked anything in him. But what had just happened between him and Madame de Pleunier did shock something in him. He looked back on it with utter disgust and contrition. He blamed himself for it. He felt degraded by it. He ought never to have been drawn into it. And he was resolved not to go on with it.

## A NEW WAY OF LIFE

No one, perhaps, could have understood the exact feeling he had if he had tried to explain it. He knew that and said to himself that he could never tell anyone of it. But then immediately followed the ghastly thought :

'But what about her ? Shan't I have to tell *her* ?'

That was a dilemma which seemed to him the worst he had ever been confronted with. For he knew Madame de Pleunier now, knew the intensity of her nature, the recklessness she was capable of, her persistence, her love of possession, her sensuality. He knew, too, of the wounds two men had inflicted on her. Could he add to these wounds ? It seemed impossible. And yet he felt that he must. But she must never know, or even suspect, that the reason for his abrupt withdrawal from her would be that he was unable to go on feeling with her what he had always been able to feel with Aziza. He could never let her know that. So what was to be done ?

It seems inevitable that some women must always fatally be drawn to the wrong sort of men, to just the men who can never give them happiness. Evidently Madame de Pleunier was such a woman.

When Noel reached La Marsa as usual he left the carriage and started on his walk to the *plage*. On the way he had to pass the Résidence over which the tricolor was flying. As he was coming to it he heard behind him the sound of wheels and of bells and looked round.

A hired carriage went by him. In it was sitting, bolt upright, Madame de Pleunier, with a sun umbrella held over her head and a white gauze veil hanging from her shady black-and-white hat. She was looking straight before her. Noel only saw her in profile. But her upright figure seemed to him to suggest resolution, happiness, even triumph.

He stopped. She must be going to the Résidence. Yes, the carriage drew up before the entrance, and she got out of it with an easy movement and disappeared. She had not seen him. He was thankful for that. And he hurried out of the village.

When he had finished his bathe and walked back to La Marsa he found his Maltese coachman and told him he wouldn't start for Sidi Bou Saïd before about ten o'clock. Then he set out towards the wooden restaurant by the sea. He had tea there, wandered vaguely along the shore afterwards and finally went back to the village. There he ate a bad dinner in a fifth-rate restaurant, sat out afterwards smoking a pipe at the edge of the road, then found his carriage, and gave the order, "*A Sidi Bou Saïd !*"

It seemed to him that the man drove unusually fast. Why hurry ? Why ply the whip on the horses ?

"*Pas si vite !*" he called out.

The driver muttered something that sounded ill-tempered. Probably he was in a hurry to get back as soon as possible to his home in La Marsa and bed. But for a few minutes he ceased from urging on the horses. Then again came the perpetual crack of the whip. Noel said nothing more.

Soon, too soon, he saw in the distance the lights of Sidi Bou Saïd, and when they had mounted the hill and passed the entrance to Dar El Manzar he found the village all alive, making the most of the comparatively cool atmosphere that had succeeded the feverish heat of the storm. Coolness and calm ! What a benediction ! And the villagers were determined to make the most of it. There was the sound of native music in the open space before the principal café, and a crowd was gathered listening to it and indulging in talk among the coffee cups. As Noel glanced quickly over it

he saw a slim figure detach itself from the white mass of spotless djelabiahs. The horses, jingling their bells, trotted on towards the house of Sir Tom. Half rising in his seat, he looked back over the collapsed hood of the carriage. A white figure was running after it. He recognized a familiar gliding movement, lithe, agile, youthful.

He was being pursued by Hassan.

The carriage drew up before the house. As Noel got out of it Hassan appeared at his elbow.

*"Moosoo—moi ici !"*

Noel's brow contracted in a frown, below which he tried to force a smile. The result must, he felt, have been a horrible grimace. But Hassan was unperturbed. He held out a hand. A note was in it. Of course !

*"Merci,"* Noel said, taking it.

Then adding at once that he would send an answer in the morning, he paid the driver, bade Hassan good night and prepared to go decisively into the house. But a hand gripped his sleeve.

*"Réponse pour Madame, moosoo."*

*"But it's late. I'll send an answer to-morrow."*

*"Madame me dit—attendre réponse !"*

Noel looked at the boy's gleaming eyes in the night. In them he saw a dogged determination. If he went into the house, if he locked the door, Hassan wouldn't go. He'd stay there all night, waiting. He'd be there at the crack of dawn. Noel longed to drive him away as one might drive away a dog. But only sheer physical violence could have any effect upon him. That was obvious. There was the inexorable in the stare of his eyes. And physical violence was out of the question.

*"Alors—attendez !"* Noel said, trying to keep a fierce sound out of his voice but failing.

And he went into the house, leaving the boy outside. He couldn't have him in and he wouldn't hurry. Let him wait.

*"I'll take my time !"*

Only in doing that could he, at the moment, assert, however feebly, the possession of a will.

There was a small lamp alight in the hall, and he opened the letter there, then decided to go upstairs and read it in the sitting room. No doubt it was only a note to suggest another rendezvous.

He sat down by the table, on which another lamp was burning. He dreaded the reading.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

*When I woke up this morning—very, very late, I confess—the storm was gone and so were you ! To tell the truth, I actually miss the storm. I had got the habit of it. It shut us both in from the tiresome world and gave me a ridiculous sensation of safety. And we seemed to have so much to say to each other that the hours went swiftly. And of course this enchanting house helped. Didn't it ? I don't think I'm by nature a very casanière woman, but I might become so here with you for a companion. To-day is, I know, your bathing day at the plage, and I am engaged to tea at the Résidence. So we'll let to-day pass, shall we ? But what about to-morrow ? Come when you like and stay as long as you like. You are made absolutely free of this house and garden. Just tell*



*me at what time you propose to come. I am sending Hassan with this, and he is to wait for an answer, however late you come back. Dine to-morrow night, in any case. I have told the musicians to be there. We shall hear them better now that the storm is over. But I miss it. I miss it! But do come to lunch too. You can take a siesta afterwards in some quiet corner. No one will disturb you. And we might have tea in the teahouse in the lower garden. I don't think you have seen that yet, have you? I am looking forward to more bathes from that lonely plage. So much better than down below here where the Bey has his bathhouse and all his people come out and almost outvie the voices of the white peacocks. We'll stick to the plage. Just give Hassan a word. Better write or he mayn't understand and may get it wrong.*

*Tous mes meilleurs souvenirs,*

*À toi toujours,*

A. DE P.

As Noel read this a feeling of blank dismay grew in him, and when he had finished it prison doors seemed to be closing about him.

What reply could he make to such a letter as this? She thought she was launching out into happiness with him for companion, for lover. He was to make up to her for her husband's desertion, for the discovery she had made about Sabatier. What exactly must have happened with Sabatier? Noel would never know. But Sabatier must have been her lover and been unfaithful to her with an African girl, with a girl of colour. Yet they were friends now, it seemed. She had managed, Noel supposed, to forgive Sabatier. Time had done its work, no doubt. She had ceased to love and so have been able to forgive—partially. But Noel knew that she still cherished a bitter feeling towards both Sabatier and her husband, and with it an absolute hatred for all the Ouled Nail women.

And now she concentrated on him, thought at last to find happiness with him. He must deceive her. But how to do it? He must have time to think the matter thoroughly out. He couldn't decide, choose the best way, if there were a best way, in a moment. She must never know about Aziza, of course. But then what excuse could he bring forward? What excuse can a man make for 'turning a woman down' suddenly, after having seemed to . . .

What a fool he had been to try to make up to her for what she had suffered, to think he could find any lasting happiness with her, a woman of middle age, after his broken and really imagined, only that, romance with Aziza. He had gone from one extreme to another, from early youth and total ignorance, except a sensual knowledge he hated to think of, to middle-aged sophistication and a knowledge of the world far greater than his own. The one had tricked him. And now he had tricked the other. He was going to inflict on the second what the first had inflicted on him: desertion after pretence. He grew hot with shame at the thought.

But now this letter! How was he going to answer it? Hassan was waiting below, outside the shut door in the night. One must write something. And of course one must see her again. There was no possibility of avoiding that. They would have to come to some explanation, though he could not imagine how he would bring it about or what would happen when he did.

He picked up a pen.

DEAR MADAME DE PLEUNIER,

No, that wouldn't do. She had written 'MY DEAR FRIEND.' He began again.

DEAR FRIEND,

*I have just come home and find your kind note. Yes. What a change from the storm !*

(He wrote very slowly.)

*But we couldn't get along for ever in a storm. I think it makes one—such a storm as that one from the south—a little bit mad, really. Don't you remember our talk about the weather ? At least that's how I feel. More English, I might say, now than I did in the storm.*

Could he put here something about his being a clergyman ? She knew that now, but could he suggest . . . ? No, that would be too hypocritical after all that had happened.

*I had a bathe to-day and stayed and dined in La Marsa. And so you were there too !*

He must come to it. He couldn't go meandering on like this.

*With regard to your kind suggestions about to-morrow . . .*

Here he made a long pause, his reluctant pen suspended over the paper. Would it be better—or not so utterly horrible—by day than by night ? He thought of the glaring sunshine of Africa. No ; night would surely be better. And he would have all day to think out how best to make things clear to her. No, not clear ! That was impossible. But to put things on a different footing between them. It had to be done—somehow. If he tried to go on, to force himself to go on with it, inevitably she would find out that on his part all desire was over. There are some things no man can successfully pretend to with a sharply discerning woman. And a woman of Madame de Pleunier's type was sharply discerning in matters of love.

"Yet I deceived her," he thought.

But for a short time, helped by the storm and their strange situation, imprisoned in that lovely and seductive house, he had managed, at any rate partially, to deceive himself. He thought of it now as a brief going mad.

*With regard to your kind suggestions about to-morrow may I then come to dinner and the music ? I should like to hear it again. It was so interesting. I think during the day I'll have a rest. To tell the truth, I feel rather played out—a very English expression—by the storm. It got rather the better of me. So I'll come to dinner . . .*

He paused again.

*with pleasure. [He must put it.] Eight o'clock as usual, I suppose. Now I'll go down and give this to Hassan.*

*My best regards,*

*Yours very sincerely,*  
NOEL HERRIOT.

He couldn't put just 'yours.' And he certainly couldn't put '*à toi toujours*,' as she had. It had been a horrible task, writing that letter. He shoved it roughly into an envelope, wrote her name on it, and went down.

Upon opening the door he found Hassan outside, looking very sulky, indeed almost malignant. To placate him—though why must he?—Noel gave him a tip with the note. Hassan darted a questioning glance at him, muttered, "*Merci, moosoo !*" and went away quickly, running almost.

It must be near midnight. The boy had, perhaps, some reason to feel angry. Noel had probably been longer than he had realized over that cursed letter.

He locked himself in as usual. Now he hated the house. He hated Sidi Bou Saïd, too ; almost he hated North Africa. Should he leave it abruptly, take the first boat to Marseille, go back to England, and show himself to Doctor Rutherford Craven ? He might get through the rest of the summer in England and come out again next winter to finish his cure.

Could he make an excuse about his health to Madame de Pleunier, say that the storm had brought on a return of symptoms that had alarmed him ? Would she believe that ?

Upstairs in his bedroom he looked at himself in the mirror. He saw an anxious, almost a tormented face. But it was surely not the face of a man who was actually ill. It suggested mental misery rather than physical suffering.

There was something ghastly in the stillness of the night after the four nights of storm. Before going to bed Noel leaned out of his window, clad only in his pyjamas. Stillness, marvellous stillness. But it brought him no sense of peace. He was dreading the morrow and perpetually turning over his problem and the best way, if possible, to resolve it in his mind. It seemed to him that he could not stay on in Sidi Bou Saïd after the explanation which he must have with Madame de Pleunier. There must surely be a complete break. Perhaps the best, perhaps the only, way to bring that about would be to assert that the influence of the storm, in spite of their cloistered four days and nights in Dar El Manzar, had had such a bad effect on his state of health that he felt he must unexpectedly go back to England for a short time, in order to show himself to the doctor who had ordered the African 'cure.' If he could manage to keep complete self-control, to speak quickly, simply, with apparent sincerity, just possibly she might believe that. It began to seem to him the only way of making the break without bringing humiliation to her. But would she remain in Sidi Bou Saïd if he left it ? It occurred to him that perhaps he could partially save the situation by a suggestion that, as he must go to England, she should return to France in the same boat. He would thus be her escort and even as far as Paris. He felt that perhaps he could manage to keep up appearances for a very short time and while on a journey. He could not keep them up in the isolation and the empty hours of Sidi Bou Saïd. Whether Madame de Pleunier would believe in his plea of ill-health was doubtful. But he thought he must risk that danger. If he did not risk it he would have to face the dreadful alternative of letting her know that, without any excuse except personal distaste, he had decided to break away from their only just begun intimacy.

'Where's my sincerity ?' Noel said to himself in despair as he tried to prepare himself for the sleep that he badly needed.

And he looked back to the beginning of insincerity, when he had carefully concealed the black clothes in his locked-up trunk. He should never have done that. His bid for a quite new way of life had been made with the aid of hypocrisy. And one insincere action seemed inevitably to lead to another. He could not stop now. He must keep on. But would Madame de Pleunier believe him?

Although after his nights in Dar El Manzar and his long day of anxious debate and irresolution he badly needed sleep, it did not come to him. Hassan's nocturnal visit with Madame de Pleunier's hopeful and planning letter had given a final touch to his dread of the morrow. He did not sleep until morning came, and then he only fell into an uneasy doze, broken by moments of semi-wakefulness during which he was vaguely conscious of disaster. He got up unrefreshed but still holding on to his decision. He must get away from Sidi Bou Saïd by the first available boat. And he would not lie about what he was going to do. He would go back to London and would consult Doctor Rutherford Craven about the state of his health. And if the doctor's verdict was favourable perhaps he would not return to North Africa. If he did return it would not be to Touggourt. He might go to Bou Saada, where he would have Bernard's company. Touggourt henceforth was barred to him.

When he came down to breakfast in the garden Bakouch looked at him with a sort of faint and lethargic surprise and slightly raised his crescent-shaped eyebrows.

"*Moosoo—malade ?*" he said.

"*Non ! Pas malade !*" said Noel as he sat down.

But he was secretly pleased at the observation. So he looked ill. That was all to the good. It would help him with Madame de Pleunier. And really he felt almost ill. He was ill in mind. And his body felt strangely, almost unnaturally, tired.

He decided to spend the whole day in the garden. But first he must find out something : on what day the next boat would sail for France. It was Thursday now. He believed there was a sailing on Tuesday and enquired of Bakouch.

Yes, there was a ship going to Marseille on Tuesday. Bakouch named it and added :

"*Pourquoi, moosoo ?*"

"*Rien !*" said Noel.

Was it possible that his life in North Africa would come to an abrupt end in four days? His heart sickened at the thought. He knew now that he loved this region—it presented itself to him as a whole just then—in spite of what he had suffered in it and was still suffering. It had a hold on him, a very strong hold. And he believed that hold would be permanent ; that, if he never came back, often, very often, he would long to be there, on the other side of the sea, would long for the vastness, the miraculous light, the mystery of the light that made even the bareness seductive and gave to the mountains what he thought of as 'a look of Eternity.' He would long, too, for the sands. He would feel as Bernard felt when he went to Paris in summer and was conscious of the coming of autumn. Time to get back to Africa ! But Bernard's life could not be his life. He was no painter. He was an English clergyman.

He absolutely dreaded Doctor Rutherford's verdict. Suppose it were

'You are cured. You can winter in England. You can get back to your work—if you want to!'

The doctor was a perspicacious man. Noel remembered very well the expression on his powerful face when he had said, "And when it has worked *if you still wish to*, you can go back to the curate's life."

The doctor had doubted, and he was justified of his doubt.

"Bakouch!"

"*Moosoo?*"

Noel told Bakouch to carry a chair to the edge of the garden from which he could look out over the gates of Africa. He would spend the morning in—preparing.

Bakouch carried the chair languidly to the garden's edge, placed it in position to command the great view, and retired. Noel was left alone. Except for two meals, his lunch and his tea, he spent the whole day alone, gazing over the sea and mentally getting ready for the evening at Dar El Manzar.

At last the landscape began gradually to assume its marvellous evening beauty, to gain in mystery minute after minute. As he watched it Noel felt a real sickness of yearning in the knowledge of his decision to leave it, almost a weakening of his resolve.

He must not look any more or he might be overcome by the mysterious fascination of Africa.

He got up and went towards the house he would soon leave, no doubt for ever.

Time to dress for Dar El Manzar, but not in his clerical clothes.

When he got to the colonnade before he rang the bell he glanced at his watch. He was too early. It was only ten minutes to eight. His anxiety had driven him to rush on the spear. But he must go in and he pushed the bell. One of the Arab servants opened the door. Noel stepped in and was shown into the patio.

No one was there. The marble table was laid for dinner. The fountain was playing. As Noel waited beside it a longing came to him to do the desperate thing, to stay on, to give Madame de Pleunier no hint that he had thought of taking the first boat back to France, to fight his way through this benumbing reluctance which had come to him with the calm of the morning. It might, perhaps, be only a mood. During those days and nights in the storm he had had a sort of illusion of something like happiness. And she had been happy. Perhaps . . .

Was she never coming? The other night she had been waiting for him in the patio. He looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past eight. Already he had been there for twenty minutes. He saw no one. But he knew that if she came and they sat down at the marble table servants would immediately appear. Were they watching him now? And Hassan, too, perhaps? They must all know. All this time he had been standing near the fountain in deep self-communion. Now he turned away brusquely, went to a divan, and sat down, feeling angry and injured. His nerves were certainly all out of gear.

Ten more minutes passed. He began to feel hot with anger, looked at his watch again. Twenty minutes past eight. This was becoming intolerable. He couldn't sit still any longer, got up, and began to pace to and

fro in the patio, passing and repassing the fountain. Presently, having turned and being on the way back to it, he heard behind him a voice say :

"What is the matter ? You look like a caged lion."

He swung round, trying to get rid of the angry expression he felt on his face. She had just reached the foot of the staircase.

"Am I a little late ? You seemed wild with impatience—for dinner."

She held out her hand. Her face looked severe below the white silk band that she was wearing again round her head. It seemed to him that her eyes were hard and searching. There was something determined, almost authoritative, in her manner, something inflexible, nothing soft or gracious.

"What is the matter ?"

"Nothing !" he said.

Then, remembering a decision, he added quickly :

"Except that I was very unwell in the night."

"After writing that letter to me ?"

"Yes."

"Such an odd letter ! Were you feeling ill when you wrote it ?"

"Yes, rather. But I only became really ill later on."

Directly he saw her he had decided that he couldn't make the attempt he had thought of. He must break away, give up his life in Sidi Bou Saïd, and, at any rate for a time, leave North Africa. For he couldn't leave Sidi Bou Saïd and stay on somewhere else, perhaps in Bou Saada. That would be too insulting to her.

"Did you ? I'm so sorry."

But her voice didn't sound as if she were sorry. Nor did her eyes look sorry.

"Come ! Let us have dinner !" she said.

She led the way to the marble table, at the same time clapping her hands. They sat down, and almost immediately the Arab servants came with dinner.

After a moment of silence she said :

"What was the matter ?"

"It must have been the result of the storm," said Noel, feeling his way and hating himself for what he was going to do.

But there was no other way out. Or if there was he couldn't think of it.

"You know I came out to Africa because I was delicate."

"Yes. You told me. But you seemed to have become quite strong. Although to-night you do look rather—tired. But that's nothing. We are all tired—at times."

He felt that she was not going to believe him. Whatever he said, unless he blurted out the horrible truth, she would not believe him. His letter must have been all wrong in spite of the care he had taken over it. Quite evidently it had filled her with suspicion. If she believed what he was trying to tell her she would have shown at least some hint of pity, but her "What was the matter ?" had sounded hard and incredulous.

"I am strong—in a way," he said.

"Ah ? In what way ?"

"Well—you know ! Physically I am much stronger than I used to be. The air, the riding—all that has helped me a lot. But a man with a chest as delicate as mine is——"

"Or was—perhaps?" she interrupted.

"I'm afraid—~~is~~—still——"

"That's too bad!"

"—feels the effect of bad weather much more, I suppose, than people who are completely healthy."

"Like me, for instance?"

"You? But I didn't mean——"

"Well, I am a healthy woman, thank God. What you English sometimes call hardy. And the storm didn't knock *me* out. Another English expression! But what exactly did it do to you? I am interested in this."

"You can't be. Hearing complaints about the health of other people is frightfully boring."

"Not necessarily, if one is interested in them. I certainly don't want to see *you* ill. But perhaps I could do something for you. I have a medicine chest here with me."

"You are laughing at me!" exclaimed Noel, unable to bear her tone and manner any longer without resentment.

"And I think *you* are laughing at *me*!"

"Indeed I'm not."

"Let's discuss that after dinner. Don't let us spoil our time now. I'm a Frenchwoman. I understand and care for good food. And I don't believe in having violent discussions at meals!"

"Violent! But——"

"Well, let us say simply—discussions. Let us talk of something else till we have dined. Marguerite's cook is first-rate. Isn't he, though he is a native?"

"Yes, he is."

"I had a letter from Marguerite to-day."

"Did you? How is she?"

"All right. She asked specially after you. She sent you messages."

"Oh—thank you!"

"And she wants to know whether you will still be here when she comes back."

"Is she coming?"

"Not yet. But she may join me here some time in"—she fixed her eyes on him—"October."

"Oh!"

"She hopes you will still be here then."

"That's very kind of her."

"You will—won't you? You took Sir Tom's house for——"

"I know," he interrupted, feeling that she was reading his mind with as much ease as if it were an open book in her hands. "I know I did. I took a great liking to Madame de Varenne. She interested me."

"And you interested her. Well?"

"Yes?"

"Will you be here in October? It's not far off."

Noel felt that he couldn't bear any more of this while the two Arab servants were attending upon them. She was driving him mercilessly. He felt her just then as entirely merciless, as a woman may become when she feels herself scourged. But what had he done yet? Nothing! She could only be guessing in the dark. But she was guessing. The letter he had

composed with such care obviously had roused acute suspicion, perhaps even amounting to a conviction, in her, had pierced her. And she couldn't rest until she knew more, in spite of what she had just said about being a Frenchwoman caring for good food and not believing in discussions while eating it.

"I'll tell you after dinner," he said bluntly because he was feeling so desperately uncomfortable. "Are the musicians coming?"

"I asked them to come soon after nine. But I can easily put them off."

"Oh, but why?"

"If you want to talk. If you want to tell me things. They might be disturbing."

"Oh, I don't think so."

"Well, then, we will see. They may not be here quite punctually. These natives have no sense of time. None at all. So I dare say we can have our talk and finish it before they arrive."

All the time she was speaking she kept turning her head and looking at him, as if to see how he took what she was saying. He did not know how much his face showed. But he felt full of guilt and yet now determined to go through with it. They must have it out. She was on the track of his intention. She might not know just what it was. But she was hard on the track. They must come to a conclusion that night. It was now inevitable.

"I'll ask her, I'll beg her, to come away with me. I'll be her escort to Paris. Then, perhaps, things won't be so awfully bad. But she must believe I was ill in the night. I'll make her—somehow," he thought.

An idea came to him.

"Could I—might I have just a drop of brandy?" he said.

"Of course, if you want it. You really want it?"

"Yes. I had a sort of attack in the night."

She spoke in Arabic to one of the servants, who immediately went softly away.

"I'm so sorry. What was it?"

"A slight hæmorrhage," he said. "Do forgive me. I hate—don't let us talk about it."

Her mouth twisted sideways, giving her face for a moment a look of disgust. Then she said in a low voice:

"So bad as that!"

"I'm sorry. You asked me."

For the first time since they had been together he felt that he had perhaps impressed her, that perhaps she was taking his lie for truth. The sense of shame increased in him.

"Do let us drop it," he said. "It's such a beastly subject. And at dinner! I oughtn't to have—but you asked me."

"Yes. Perhaps it is my fault. Ah, here comes the brandy!"

The Arab who brought it placed first at Noel's right hand a large globular glass.

"Oh, I don't want much!" he said. "Only a very little."

"You can stop him."

The Arab lifted a decanter and poured. Noel tried to stop him, but he didn't seem to understand. And Noel caught hold of the decanter.

"That's far too much!" he exclaimed, pushing the decanter away from the glass. "As if I could drink all that!"



"Never mind. You needn't. You can keep it by you while we have coffee, in case you feel you need a little more later on."

"Thank you, but I shan't."

The Arab put the decanter down on the table. He looked offended, and his large dark eyes went to Madame de Pleunier. She smiled at him reassuringly and said something. He salaamed and went away but looked back at Noel, who was lifting his glass.

"I suppose it's good brandy?" said Madame de Pleunier. "It comes out of Varenne's cellar."

"It's excellent. I don't know much about brandy. But I should say it's superlative. Won't you have some?"

"Yes. But only a little."

He poured for her.

"That's enough. *I've* not been ill in the night."

Did she believe or was she still totally incredulous? He thought that she was now in doubt, half inclined to believe and pity, half inclined to think he was trying to trick her and suspicious. The sip of brandy he had taken warmed him. Perhaps if he drank a little more . . .

He lifted his glass again.

"Your health!" he said.

"I think it would be more to the purpose if I drank to yours," she replied.

But she didn't lift her glass.

"But——" he began.

"Later, perhaps," she said, "under the gallery."

Yes, she was still suspicious. But there was some doubt in her, and she didn't want to be cruel if what he had told her were true. But if it were true, and really he had been ill in the night, what would be the effect upon her? He fancied she was the type of woman who would probably recoil from ill-health with a faint disgust, as women, ardent in her way, often do. She was certainly not of the ministering-angel type. Self-sacrifice was hardly her main characteristic. His recent experience had taught him that she had a passion for possession, that the desire to dominate was alive in her. And she was a proud woman, who had twice been humiliated. Sometimes he wondered that she had been able to tell him of that. But the telling had surely been considered by her as a weapon, and she had used it as a weapon.

Till dinner was over they talked with less intimacy, talked "for the Arabs," as she said, though neither of them understood any English. But they were penetratingly observant, nevertheless, and must be considered. Now and then she took a small sip of the brandy. Noel drank more than she did. Perhaps it would give him courage. He needed courage that night.

When they got up from the table she said :

"As soon as they bring our coffee you can tell me."

"But the music!"

"The music can wait—if we wish. The musicians will be over our heads in the gallery. And they will keep quiet until I give the signal."

She put palm to palm.

"Like that. They know. I have told them."

"Shall I carry your glass?"

"No, thank you. I have a steady hand."

She looked at his right hand.

"Your hand is steady too! Wonderful after your bad night!"

"I didn't sleep," he said.

And that was true. He was glad to be able to say one thing that was true.

They sat down on the divan under the gallery. Coffee was brought. They were left alone.

"Of course smoke if you want to," she said.

"Presently! I think I'll wait a little."

"Just as you like! And now—will you be here in October when Marguerite comes?"

"I had meant to stay," he began. "You know that."

"Certainly I had understood it. Well?"

"But after what happened last night I'm afraid I *must* make a change in my plans."

He stopped. She said nothing. She sat motionless on the divan, looking at him.

"It's like this——"

He stopped again.

"What change?" she said.

"What happened last night showed me that I wasn't as strong as I'd believed I was. In Touggourt I never experienced the worst Africa can do. Here I have!"

"Do you mean the storm?"

"Yes."

"These tremendous storms, such as we have just had, don't come very often."

"But when they do!"

He spread out his hands. She looked at them and said:

"Well?"

There was a merciless sound in her voice. She sat very still, and there was great self-control in her manner. But he felt near to violence, very near.

Remembering suddenly his first day near the desert at the inn in El Kantara, he said:

"Many of the Arabs—the desert Arabs, I mean—cough a lot."

"That is the keef. They smoke keef. And this isn't the desert."

"No."

"You seemed wonderfully well in Touggourt. And *you* don't smoke keef."

"No, of course not. But after my experience last night I feel I must be careful."

"Can't you be careful—in Sidi Bou Saïd?"

"You told me you were very strong."

"I have good health, luckily. Yes?"

"When I came out to North Africa I was practically—in fact, I was—an invalid. I came out solely for a cure. I did what I was told to do by a very clever doctor in London, a doctor like no one else, highly original in his methods, and I got wonderfully better. I want to get perfectly well, to be completely cured. I've been out here, as you know, for more than nine

months—with certainly splendid results. But now I've just had an unexpected—well, not a breakdown, but a setback. I've been thinking in the night and all to-day what I'd better do. And I've come to the conclusion that I must see my doctor again."

"Where? In London?"

"Yes. He lives in London, in Wimpole Street."

"And are you going to London?"

"I'm afraid I must."

"There are two or three quite good doctors in Tunis. I could give you their names. Marguerite knows them."

"You are wonderfully good to me. But my doctor understands my case. He has proved it. I don't want to change him."

"He ordered you to North Africa."

"Yes."

"You don't suppose surely that, if the North African climate is necessary to you, he will advise you to leave it?"

"No. I don't say that. But in summer——"

"I have had some experience of English summers. They were hardly as full of sunshine as—here."

"Of course there's no comparison!"

"You mean simply to run across to London for a look over by your doctor and then to come back here? That wouldn't take much more than a week."

"No—if I did that. But it seems to me that if I go I had better stay over there as long as the fairly warm weather lasts. I shall get his advice, be examined thoroughly, and told what to do next winter."

"After what you say has happened he is sure to order you away for the winter, isn't he?"

"I fully expect he will."

"And then you would come back to Touggourt?"

"How can I quite tell what I can do till I've seen the doctor? He might tell me to come back to this climate at once, on account of the sun."

"Yes. And he mightn't."

"I can't tell. I can't tell anything till I see him."

He was beginning to feel desperate. He knew now that he hadn't deceived her. She didn't believe in his account of the night. She had seen through his subterfuge. He resolved to come out with the suggestion to her which he hoped might enable him to conceal from her, at any rate for a time, the cruel truth of the situation they were in. But before he was able to do it she leaned towards him, stared into his eyes, and said in a voice that had become suddenly almost shrill:

"It is not true about your health and the doctor. You are running away from me!"

"I'm not!" he said. "If you had given me time I was just going to make a suggestion to you."

"What is it?"

"As I feel I must go——"

"When do you mean to go?"

"There is a boat sailing on Tuesday."

She got up from the divan with a violent movement. He had to get up too.

This is too much!" she exclaimed. "I have never——"

"Wait! Do wait one minute!" he said. "I was just going to tell you, to ask you——"

"What?"

"But I must ask you first—do forgive me!—did you come here for me?"

"Of course I did! You know that! D'you think I came for the Cap de Carthage, for the view over Ariana, for Bou Kornine, perhaps, or Zaghouan! After what has happened you can ask me that question! Of course I came here for you and——"

"Then wait, please! Wait a moment! I want to ask you, if it's like that, to come with me when I go."

"Ah!"

Her face changed, softened. The fierceness went out of her eyes. She laid a hand on his arm.

"You want me to—— But then am I wrong? You really are going to see your doctor in London?"

"Yes, of course!" he said, thankful at last to be able to say what was true.

"And you want me to come with you to London, to be with you in England?"

"Oh, no, not that! That would be impossible."

"Why should it?"

"But your husband—the Commandant!"

"Is it wicked to go to London? What do you mean?"

"But I didn't mean that. I hadn't thought of that."

"Then what had you thought of?"

"My idea was that, as I thought, perhaps—as I hoped—you wouldn't stay on here alone, you would allow me to escort you as far as Paris."

"Take me back to Paris and deposit me on my husband's doorstep! Was that your idea?"

The bitter contempt and indignation in her voice struck him to silence. They stood looking at each other, reading each other, for an instant. Then his eyes fell before hers. The poor little edifice of deception he had raised lay in ruins.

"Was *that* your idea?" she repeated.

"I thought it seemed the best way."

"Ah! Did you?"

A horrible new fear came into his mind, so startling that he was forced to express it in the hope of being reassured.

"Surely you don't mean that you don't intend to rejoin your husband when you go back to France!" he exclaimed.

"Of course I should rejoin him *if* I went back. But I had no intention of going back. He is quite happy without me. And I have been happy here without him. And now you coolly come here and tell me you intend to go away, that you have already decided on the boat—next Tuesday, four days ahead—and, that if I choose to fall in with your plans and break my stay here because you break yours, you will be kind enough to look after me and the luggage during the journey, and, on arriving in Paris, you will dump me down on the doorstep of our house in the Avenue Henri Martin!"

And all this when you knew—because I told you about Marguerite—that I didn't mean to go back at all, that I was going to stay here till the time came to return for the winter to Touggourt."

"You meant to stay over here in North Africa till after next winter?"

"Of course I did! And so did you! You came out here to be cured. The doctor—that marvellous original doctor!—told you to stay till you were cured. And now, because you say you are *not* cured and have just found it out—last night—you mean to take the risk of going from *this* climate into the English climate and staying on in it indefinitely. And you expect me to believe that all this is merely a question of health. In fact, you take me for a fool. But I am not a fool; I am *not* a fool. And you ought to have discovered that long ago."

She stopped speaking, suddenly half shut her eyes, which had been flaming with anger, and stretched her lips in a faint ugly smile.

"How easily I could prove it to you!" she almost whispered, as if to herself.

"Even Sabatier never thought me that," she added. "Nor did my husband. It remained for *you* to give me that last insult. You, who have been so incredibly *naïve*!"

The blood rushed up to the roots of his hair.

"How was I *naïve*?" he said angrily.

"Ah! That has touched you, has it? That has pierced through your thick hide!"

"I don't know what you mean."

"And perhaps I am not going to tell you. Perhaps *I* have some sense of the second person, some decency left for you, in spite of the way in which you are trying to treat me."

Something in her look and manner—though it seemed to Noel that both had become almost menacing—reminded him of the one and only time when he had thought for a moment that she might be afraid of him. Her allusion to his *naïveté* had touched him on the raw. And how dared she speak of his 'thick hide' when his sensitiveness was almost a curse laid upon him?

"I think I have quite as much sense of the second person as you have," he said. "And unfortunately for me my *hide*, as you call it, is abominably thin."

"If it were you could never treat me like this after all I have told you about my life, about how I have been humiliated and what I have had to suffer. I have trusted you, made you my confidant, and this is the result. You think you can treat me without the slightest consideration and that I shall take whatever you choose to hand out to me lying down—as you English say. You think you can profit by the confession I made to you because I relied on your manhood. I might say your gentlemanhood. Evidently I have misread you. You are one of those who think anyone can have a kick at a woman who they know has been down."

"You are utterly misreading me now. I could never do that."

"Then what is the meaning of all this? Let us clear the ground. Let us get down to the truth. Do you expect me to believe that your health has suddenly taken a turn for the worse, that you had an attack of hæmorrhage in the night, and that, in consequence of it, you feel that you must

rush back to London to see a particular doctor? You say you don't think me a fool?"

"I don't."

"Then why invent such a story as that to cover up something else, your real reason for resolving to leave Sidi Bou Saïd, when you meant to spend the whole long summer here, the African summer that lasts so long? Into what we Europeans think of as winter almost? Why? Why? I will know why! You can't deny me that right after all we have been to each other."

Noel stood for a moment in a grim silence, totally disabled by her attack and by her exposure of her utter incredulity. All his pretence swept away, discarded as too flimsy for consideration, much less for acceptance. She demanded the truth. But how could he give it to her? The man with a thick hide, instead of a horribly delicate skin, might have given it, the man who could be brutal with a woman once he had done with her. But Noel was the opposite of that type of man. He felt that he couldn't tell her why. He felt also that probably by this time she knew why. Hadn't she said in that suddenly shrill voice: "You are running away from me!" She must know. But she was determined to force him to tell her what she already knew. And then she would surely turn upon him with a storm of reproaches. He felt that she was at the very edge of her control and dreaded unspeakably what might happen if she went over the edge.

What he would have said if there had not been an interruption at that moment he never knew. Perhaps he would have insisted doggedly that his lie was the truth in spite of the violence and contempt of her unbelief in it. But there was an interruption. Hassan appeared, gliding along on light feet from the servants' quarters, went up to his mistress, stood by her, said, "*Musique prête!*" and added some words in Arabic, uttered in a very soft voice.

When she saw him Madame de Pleunier's face changed completely and with startling abruptness. All the flaming anger disappeared from it instantly, and in reply to his announcement she slightly smiled, raising her eyebrows, and said, "*Déjà!*" Then she turned, still faintly smiling, to Noel and said:

"The musicians are in the gallery already. Shall we sit down again and allow them to begin?"

"Just as you like!" he said, unable to imitate her marvellous self-possession but doing his best to look natural and not like the man who had just been beaten with words.

"Very well!"

She spoke to Hassan again. He ran off and vanished.

When he had gone she said:

"Perhaps it's just as well that he came. I think we were both getting rather heated. And that's no good. Come, let us sit down again!"

She went back to the divan under the gallery. He followed her, and they sat down. It was evident to him that she had suddenly made up her mind to take another line with him. The unexpected appearance of Hassan had suggested it to her, and with the swiftness of an intricate woman, in whose character persistence was a marked trait, she had succeeded in smothering her violence, as one may smother the flames of a fire by pouring ashes upon it. But under the ashes—what was there? He felt more

menaced by the abrupt calm of her than by her previous almost vicious intensity.

She had an aim and he knew it. There was danger to him in this lull.

After sitting down they were silent for a moment. Then in a low, carefully restrained voice she said :

"Now you can smoke and I'll have a cigarette."

He lit one for her and one for himself.

"Not your pipe?"

He shook his head.

"I can't. Not just now."

A satirical look seemed to slide through her eyes. It disappeared as a soft deep voice in the gallery, plaintive but with no shrillness of sorrow in it, came to them. It was accompanied by a violin with two strings, a lute, a small drum. Now and then there was added a sound like the chink-chink of something thin and metallic. Noel did not ask what the song meant. It must be a love song, and the love was unhappy, the song of a lover yearning and frustrated.

She leaned back against a cushion and shut her eyes but went on smoking her cigarette. Noel glanced at her, and, seeing that her eyes were shut, continued to look at her.

This woman had upset his life, had come from Paris to drag him out of his isolation and plunge him into this vortex of desperate trouble. Did she really care for him, or had she merely fastened upon him because he was a man in whom something, perhaps only physical, pleased her and with whom she thought she could pay herself back for the deceptions and betrayals that had wounded her life? Impossible for him to know. But he did know that she was almost desperately concentrated upon him and there was in her an unusual power of concentration. Her husband must have known that in the past; Sabatier, too, must have known it. Yet both of them had broken away from it brutally, perhaps, and escaped from it into the freedom they needed. And she had been left to her punishment.

Something in her white face, severe in its stillness below the white silk band that was bound about her head, moved him to a pity that the music seemed to intensify by its plaintive wistfulness, full of a suggestion of things past and of antique sorrows. And again he asked himself whether he could sacrifice himself to her, force himself to the attempt to give her the happiness she sought in him and had missed in others. If he made that attempt could it possibly be successful?

There are sacrifices of self that are possible and that actually do have some success. But this type of self-sacrifice, a pretence of a love that did not exist and had never existed, though she must have believed in it for two nights in the midst of a storm—could that succeed? Noel knew it could not.

But she meant to fight for it, spurred on to a last fierce attempt to seize happiness by the two failures she had suffered in her love life. And she was a woman not adapted to failure. Success should have been hers, and she knew it. If defeated now she would sink into lasting bitterness, the acid bitterness of a finally disappointed woman who feels in herself stuff that should have made for a life of success.

He felt terribly sorry for her and an almost condemnatory hatred of the impossibilities in the life of feeling that, like a subterranean stream, flows for

ever beneath the life of action in which men and women make themselves manifest to each other. But though he was sorry for her he was afraid of her. For he had to resist her. He could do nothing else.

The voice died away in the gallery, but the instruments continued to give out their fragile music, accompanied by the soft murmur of the little Basque drum.

Madame de Pleunier opened her eyes and met Noel's eyes fixed upon her.

"You've been looking at me for a long time," she said in a quite gentle voice, putting down what was left of her cigarette in an ash tray.

"How could you know that?" he asked uncomfortably.

"I felt it all the time. Well! Are we to be as we were in the storm, or are we enemies?"

"I could never be your enemy."

"You can say that, but I say you might be."

"I think it more likely that you could be mine."

"I believe I could be a good enemy. Do you feel that you couldn't?"

"I'm no saint, but I don't think I could ever wish to do active harm to another."

"Are you sure?"

She spoke very slowly, as if in hesitation.

"Suppose I tested you," she added after an instant of silence.

He waited. He felt as if something important were coming, something, perhaps, that might determine their relations finally.

"No. I don't think I will—yet," she added. "Perhaps I'll keep that in reserve."

There was something almost sinister in her manner and in the way she said that.

"In reserve for what?" he asked anxiously.

"You will know—if! Meanwhile can't we be friends?"

"*Friends*—yes, of course! Should I have asked you to sail with me when I leave Tunis if I didn't feel we were friends?"

"If you are a true friend you won't go. No, wait! Listen to me. Let me speak! You surprised me. You made me very angry. After what has happened you can't go. Consider! Ask yourself! In Touggourt you let me arrange about your having Sir Tom's house for six months. You need not have, but you did. Certainly I was the one to suggest it. But you were perfectly free to refuse. I did not insist. How could I? I had no power to. I simply thought it would suit you, as you meant to stay over here for the summer. Isn't that true?"

"If you say so I must accept it."

"But isn't it true?"

"I believe you thought it would suit me well enough."

"And you meant to stay here all the summer. Didn't you?"

"Yes. That is true."

"And you allowed me to come here to Dar El Manzar, in the belief, in the certainty, that you would be here all the summer."

"Please—no! There was no question of that. I had no right to *allow* you or not allow you. I did not know you were coming. I had no idea of it. You said you came only because of your father's death. I knew nothing of that. You never wrote. I knew absolutely nothing."



"Let us leave that. Anyhow, I came, knowing you were here for the whole summer. I came here *because of you*. You must know that."

"I thought perhaps——" said Noel with hesitation.

She interrupted him.

"Didn't you *know* it?"

"I did think perhaps you had."

"Of course! You knew it! You are not a fool any more than I am. I was willing that you should know. I meant you to know."

"From the beginning?"

"Very soon!"

She waited for a moment, apparently expecting him to make some comment on this. But he said nothing.

"Well, you know that. And you know much more, I have told you things of my life that I have told to no one else, with one exception—Marguerite de Varenne."

Again she stopped. This time Noel felt that he must say something. And he said:

"Yes, you have! But it was of your own free will. I didn't seek to know them. I never asked."

"That doesn't matter. I told you even of the humiliation I had had to put up with. Doesn't that prove something to you?"

But he avoided it and only said:

"You need not have done it. I was very sorry."

"What do you mean?"

"Sorry to know it. I felt—I felt it would have been better not."

"Why?"

"For you. Such things are better forgotten."

"Such things?"

"Yes. Our misfortunes."

"*Our* misfortunes!"

"I mean one's misfortunes."

"You said *our*!"

"Anyone's—of that kind. Better forgotten and never spoken of to anyone."

"Can't anyone be trusted then? Must we keep everything that affects our lives shut up in our heart? Isn't that very hard?"

"I think it's better," he said obstinately, thinking of what he had suffered in Touggourt, and since he had left Touggourt, and was suffering now; recalling memories that were making it utterly impossible to give to her what she wanted and really was pleading for. "Telling can't do any good."

"I say it might. It might bring one sympathy and understanding and forgiveness."

"Forgiveness? What for?"

"For conduct that might otherwise be misunderstood and condemned."

"What are you thinking of exactly?" he said, realizing not only from her words, but even more sharply, perhaps, from her manner and her look, that she was thinking of something personal, something in her own life.

"Weren't you surprised in Touggourt at my detestation of those Ouled Nail women, those desert dancers? I think you were."

He didn't say anything.

"I think you were. But are you surprised at my feeling about them now after what I have told you? Wouldn't any woman, any woman of Europe, especially any Frenchwoman, feel as I do if she had suffered because of them as I have?"

"I dare say she would," he muttered.

"You know she would. And now I have told you *why* haven't you some sympathy for me, some understanding of me that you wouldn't have had otherwise?"

Why had she suddenly fastened upon this detestable topic, any discussion of which was almost unbearable by him? He felt desperate and, scarcely knowing what he was doing, reached for his glass with the brandy in it.

"Yes, yes, of course I have!" he said, but roughly because of his intense discomfort and hatred of what he was saying.

Hastily he drank all that was left of the brandy and put the empty glass down. Her eyes went from him to it and again to him furtively.

"But," he added, "I don't know what you meant about forgiveness. I have nothing to forgive you for. What have I to forgive you for?"

He said this in a loud voice, a sudden feeling coming upon him that she knew something he did not know and perhaps ought to know.

"Please explain! Please tell me! Is there something that——?"

The singing began again in the gallery; this time it was a song gathered by Comte de Varenne from an Indian source and was full of a sort of dancing violence. The drumming that accompanied it was much louder than before.

"I hate all deception!" he added, stung by the at times almost waspish music, for now there was added to the little orchestra the shriek of the African pipe heard so often by him in the Sahara dancing house.

She broke into sudden laughter.

"You hate deception! But that is charming; that is delicious; that is impayable! That you should say that to *me*. Irony could scarcely go farther than that."

She lay back against the silken cushion and laughed till it was obvious to him that hysteria was getting hold of her.

"Don't laugh!" he said. "Stop laughing! There's nothing to laugh at!"

"Nothing to laugh at! Isn't there? That is as much as you know! That is as much as you understand of a woman!"

Her laughter rose to a sort of paroxysm. Her whole body shook. And her head with the white silk band round it wobbled to and fro against the cushion.

It seemed to him then that the brandy he had just drunk united in some mysterious way with the shriek of the African pipe coming down to them from the gallery and reminding him of the life in Touggourt, the life in which for the first time he had known intensity and how his body was capable of taking charge of his whole being.

He seized her wrists.

"Stop laughing! I won't have you laugh!"

Once for a moment he had seen in her a possibility of fear, fear of him. He felt a fierce need to assert himself, to play upon that possibility, to

dominate, to be the master—for once. Still holding her two wrists in a tight grip, he leaned over her and stared into her face.

"I forbid you to laugh! Stop! And tell me!"

Her laughter grew softer, fainter, and finally died out of her in a feeble prolonged chuckle. She lay back an instant in an inert silence.

"Tell me! Tell me at once!"

"What is it you want to know?"

"What you are keeping secret from me."

She was silent for what seemed to him a long time, either considering or in a state of exhaustion. He didn't know which. At last she said in a husky voice, made husky by laughing:

"Tell me something first and then perhaps I will."

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me why you have utterly changed since the storm. Tell me why you mean to leave Sidi Bou Saïd—on Tuesday, within only four days. Tell me why you told me that miserable lie—about hæmorrhage."

He let go of her wrists and sat back, suddenly cold, though the African pipe still shrieked to them from the gallery and the drumming never ceased for a moment.

"If I tell you will you tell me?" he said.

"I may. I don't promise. But I may."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Oh—don't bother about that! What does it matter in this world if one woman is *hurt*?"

"You have been very kind to me. I would gladly be friends with you, go on being friends with you, if it were possible."

"Thank you very much."

"I want to be—just friends with you."

"Just friends? After the storm?"

"That's all I can be. I'm sorry."

After a long silence she said:

"Your reason?"

"I can't be what you want me to be. I'm horribly sorry."

"Really? And what is that?"

"You know."

"But I should like you to tell me."

"I can't be—go on being—your lover."

"And is that why you have decided to leave Sidi Bou Saïd on Tuesday?"

"Yes."

"And why can't you? Tell me?"

He thought of the girl in the green shawl and of what he had felt with her in the women's quarter of Touggourt, felt crazily perhaps—how many would think so!—but the body of man is unaccountable. All he knew was that he had felt it, the real thing—in its way—and that he could not feel it with this woman who sat beside him, probing him with her questions, probing him with her eyes, determined to turn the dagger round in her wound and to reach the most exquisite point of suffering.

"You would hate me if I did," he said at last in a low voice.

"Would that matter? Isn't hatred only the reverse side of love?"

"I don't want you to hate me. I only want that we should remain just friends."

"We have never been friends. I never felt friendship for you."

"But when we first met——"

"Never, never! You are not the sort of man I could be friends with. Sabatier—yes! Even after what happened in the end I was able to have a sort of friendship with him. And it still exists. I don't care *that* for him now." (She made a fluttering gesture with her right hand.) "But we can call ourselves friends. There are some affinities between us: of country, of birth, of ways of life, out here and in France."

"But why not with——?"

"No, no, no. And you mean to go—on Tuesday? You *will* go?"

"I must. I feel——"

"You need not trouble to tell me what you *feel*. I quite understand that now."

The music in the gallery stopped abruptly on a note that gave to the hearer no sense of finality. In the silence Noel felt again the sensation of nakedness that had come to him in the dead calm of the morning after the storm, nakedness of the world unclothed, stripped from the storm, and of himself in it.

For a moment she looked startled by the sudden silence and was herself silent. She had stopped leaning back against the cushion now and was sitting bolt upright as he had seen her sitting when she passed him in the carriage in La Marsa.

"You mean to leave on Tuesday, do you?" she said at last.

"Yes—I must."

"And you kindly invite me to go with you?"

"I would like to escort you as far as Paris."

"Very kind! And you don't mean to come back here?"

"I very much doubt if——"

She interrupted him.

"Suppose the famous doctor in London who ordered you to North Africa finds you not completely cured and orders you to come back? You will still have Sir Tom's house. Would you come back to it?"

"I think I'd better not."

She got up. He was going to get up, too, but she made a gesture to him to stay where he was.

"Very well! Now we know; we know where we are. At least I do. And now it's my turn to tell *you* something. You said just now that you hated all deception, and I couldn't help laughing. It struck me as so marvellously humorous coming from *you*. But perhaps it is because you so hate deception that you are such a fool when you try to deceive."

"What do you mean?" he said, getting up and confronting her.

"Your *naïveté* is almost incredible. Have you really supposed all this time that I was ignorant of your affair with that little prostitute in Tougourt, the girl in the green shawl?"

"You—you knew of it!" he said, stammering.

"Of course I knew of it! Marguerite knew of it too. We both knew it!"

"But—but—when you asked me that day to come with you to see the procession—the woman going away to be married, going into the desert with the Bedouin?"

"Well?"

"Did you know who was in the palanquin?"

"Of course I did! I wasn't going to let *you* become a victim to one of those hateful women, like my husband, like Sabatier. I was determined to save *you* from——"

"Be quiet, will you!"

He came close to her.

"Did Sabatier know this? But he couldn't have known!"

"He knows it now. I told him that night when he dined with me here. He liked you. I was afraid he might interfere between us, try to interfere. I placed all my cards on the table and bound him to secrecy. He's a gentleman. I knew he would keep his word."

"Then that was why he—— But what do you mean by *saving*? *You* didn't save me! *She* tricked me, not you! You only knew of it when it happened."

"Did I? That's as much as you know."

Her lips stretched in a cruel smile.

"I helped to bring it about."

She said the last words with bitter defiance.

He seized her again by the wrists.

"You couldn't have! How?"

"Through little Hassan. I determined to make absolutely certain of getting rid of the girl forever. There's no end to the greed of these women. More money, always more money! That's all they care for. Her dowry was bigger than you ever suspected. The Bedouin was in luck."

He seized her by the shoulders. The brandy was working in him. At that moment he was capable of a crime.

"You—you——" he stammered, staring into her eyes.

"Hassan!" she screamed. "Hassan!"

Hassan came running from some hidden place. Noel's grip on her grew stronger. At that moment the music began again in the gallery, the dancers' music of Touggourt. It seemed to infuriate her, to give her a nervous strength greater even than a man's. With a violent movement she wrested herself out of his grip and rushed from under the gallery. He was following her when Hassan stood in his way, lifting his fists and shouting Arabic words.

Madame de Pleunier stretched up her arms towards the musicians' gallery, beat her hands together, and cried out:

"Khalass!"

Noel stood still for a moment, like a man petrified. His brain seemed to him to be in a blaze. Then for a moment a black cloud seemed to descend and to blot out everything from his sight. It cleared and he saw Hassan before him, saw his clenched fists and his fierce gleaming eyes.

He sprang on the boy, seized him, struck him on the side of the head, and hurled him into the fountain.

Then he made a dash for the colonnade. He must save himself from the commission of a crime.

The last sounds he heard before the great door crashed behind him were Madame de Pleunier's furious voice shrieking to the musicians and the beat of her clapping hands mingling with the thud of the African drum.

Ten days later, when Doctor Rutherford Craven had just dismissed a

woman patient who had been to consult him in Wimpole Street, his manservant came in and said :

"There's a gentleman just called, sir, whose name isn't down in the book for to-day."

"Then I can't see him. You know the list's full. The next patient is Colonel Aikin."

"Yes, sir. He's in the waiting room now. But the gentleman is very anxious for an appointment. It's the gentleman who came last year, the gentleman you ordered to Africa."

"Ah ! Wait a moment. Do you mean a young clergyman ? Touched in the lungs he was."

"That's it, sir. He doesn't look so much like a clergyman this time."

"Doesn't he though ? All the better perhaps. Give me the book."

"Here it is, sir."

The doctor took it and looked it over.

"Very full to-day."

"Yes, sir."

"But I must—ask him to come back at six this evening. I can't see him till then. Six punctually."

"Yes, sir."

"And now Colonel Aikin."

Just before six Doctor Craven got rid of the last patient whose name had been down on his list, stretched out his powerful arms, expanded his broad chest, and rang his bell.

His manservant came.

"The young clergyman here ?"

"Been here over half an hour, sir."

"Keen to be looked over, eh ! Show him in."

The doctor went back to his table near the window, sat down facing the room with the light behind him, and waited with his keen eyes fixed on the door. It was opened almost immediately and Noel walked in, not dressed as a clergyman, upright, lean, with a bronzed face and grave, self-conscious eyes.

"Aha ! So it's you ! Very glad to see you !"

He extended a big hand over the table without getting up.

"Sit down. You've been all this time in North Africa ?"

"Yes."

"Lucky fellow ! I envy you. Where were you ?"

"El Kantara, Biskra, Touggourt for the winter, then Sidi Bou Saïd near Tunis."

"Aha ! Grand country, isn't it ?"

"Yes, indeed. But do you know it personally ?"

"I do. Or I should never have recommended it to you. I don't go by books. I go by personal investigation. Did you live as I told you to live ?"

"I rode all the way from Biskra to Touggourt on horseback."

"Good !"

"All through the winter and into the spring I lived in a tent pitched in the desert with an oasis at its back behind an earth wall."

"I know, I know ! Palms looking over at you. Glorious ! And then ?"

"I went out shooting and rode nearly every day."

"Just what I wanted for you."

"I ended up not in a tent, but in a house I rented in Sidi Bou Saïd."

"A delightful village. Fine sea air. Grand views. And exceptionally decent people for Orientals. And now you've come back to be looked at. I thought perhaps you'd stay through the summer."

"I meant to but changed my mind."

"Ah!"

The doctor didn't ask why. While they talked he was summing up the patient and forming his own conclusions about him.

After some more enquiries into Noel's way of life in North Africa, his riding, his shooting, his intercourse with the natives, he said:

"Now for a complete examination. Kindly undress. You remember the last time?"

"Very well," said Noel, getting up from his chair.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour later, during which the doctor had only spoken to give Noel now and then brief directions, such as "Breathe deeply,"

"Now cough," etc., he said:

"That will do. You can dress."

And he went away from the medical couch and sat down again behind his large table.

When Noel had dressed he was told to come back to his chair.

"Now then! But first I'll tell you something. You are wonderfully better. But you are not *completely* cured yet."

"No?"

"No. There's still a small patch. But that can be got rid of. Did you think you were cured?"

"No. But I knew the improvement in my health was very great."

"It is. You spoke of having rented a house in Sidi Bou Saïd."

"Yes. I did rent one."

"And you haven't given up the lease yet?"

"No! I have the house till the end of October."

"I should advise you to go back there and stay out your lease and then have another winter in Touggourt, living as you did before. If you do that I feel sure you will be as sound as a bell. Or shall we say as I am? What's the matter? Don't you want to?"

"I—there are reasons against that," said Noel uncomfortably.

"What are they? Can you tell me?"

"I might perhaps go back to Sidi Bou Saïd," said Noel, feeling almost sure, though he did not actually know it, that Madame de Pleunier had already left Dar El Manzar or that she would leave it almost directly. (He had neither heard from her nor seen her since the horrible night of truth-telling. Nor had he seen Hassan.)

"Yes?"

"But I can't spend another winter in Touggourt."

"That's a pity. What have you against it?"

"There are reasons that I can't fully explain, Doctor. But not by my own fault entirely, though perhaps I was in some degree to blame, I got wrong with the wife of the General commanding the district there, and that makes it inadvisable for me to return there."

"Ha!" said the doctor.

He sat for a moment in silence with his eyes fixed on Noel. Then he said :

"Well, if so, there are other places suitable for a case like yours. Though women who may be got wrong with are unfortunately to be found almost everywhere. You might try something else. For instance, you might go to Egypt."

"Yes?" said Noel in a flat voice.

"A climate I can strongly recommend to you is that of Luxor in Upper Egypt. Mena House at the Pyramids would be excellent for you till the end of November. After that Luxor. And, if you like change, later on Assouan till the end of March. A fairly hard life as before. In April back to Mena House for a month or two."

"I might try that."

"Then I think you should be all right. But till then back to Sidi Bou Said, if possible, till your lease is up."

"That might be possible," Noel said but with evident reluctance. "I could find out."

"Well, I leave it to you. A short breather over here needn't be ruled out. There is often good weather in autumn. And now as to the curate's life you were so reluctant to give up last year."

Noel's face flushed.

"Oh, I've decided that I'm totally unfitted for that life now," he said in a low voice.

"Africa has destroyed that inclination, has it?"

"Yes."

"I can't say I'm surprised."

At that moment Noel remembered Sabatier's remark about men who make some great and drastic change in their lives, involving a departure from the normal of those lives, eventually coming back to it as if mysteriously compelled. That wouldn't happen with him. He was absolutely certain of that. And he said :

"I shall never go back to the clerical life. I have no right now, if I ever had it, to tell others how they ought to live. Once, in my ignorance, I believed that—— But this can only bore you. Do forgive me."

"Out of my range, you think? Eh? Not sufficiently medical? Never mind. But I'm interested in you, my boy."

"Thank you, Doctor. But why do you call me a boy?"

"Because there's a good deal of the boy in you still. Of the serious boy, mind you! And perhaps that fact will help you."

Doctor Craven got up. Noel paid him the same fee as he had paid him before. They shook hands, the doctor looking hard at the brown face, the lean figure, the very grave eyes.

"A worse curate, but possibly not a worse *man*. Is that it?" he said, smiling.

"I shall have to find that out later. But anyhow I've had my lesson."

As he said this a far-away look came into his face, and for a moment he seemed to see two women : a girl with long eyes and hands touched with henna, wearing jewels, coins, and a bright green shawl ; and a woman with a white silk band round her head, below which searching reddish-brown eyes gazed at him.



"I've had my lesson," he repeated.

'And as usual a lesson given by a woman, or possibly women,' Doctor Craven said to himself as the door shut behind Noel. 'Woman, the assiduous teacher ; man, the pupil, who, whether he likes it or not, has to take his place in the class.'

*October, 1939—July, 1940.*





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